

The 1961 Kampong Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

Loh Kah Seng



The 1961 Kampong Bukit Ho Swee fire (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore)

Burn, burn!
Burn, burn, burn, burn...

The scorching rays of the sun
Accompany the howling wind---
Ah!
Rows of attap roofs suddenly dissolve in a sea of fire!
Thick clouds of smoke, like a ferocious dinosaur,
Engulf the skies!

Pi bo pi bo...
Balls of fire and burning flames
Extend themselves from the source of the fire in four directions
With great force and power,
Flashing brightly, and dancing through the air.

Ah!
One by one, on the attap roofs,
The wicked fire demon madly spins and leaps about!
Countless columns of water
Strike and spray on the fire demon like a silver whip;

However,
With ease, the heartless fire demon roars in laughter!

Hua la la la...
Walls crumble;
Coconut trees fall...
A sudden loud, deafening sound!
What has exploded in the fire site?
----Terrifying!

Oh dear!
Even that factory has caught fire,
That school has turned into a plot of scorched earth,
And those shops, markets and gardens
Have all been engulfed by the brutal flames!

The fire displays its prowess
And demonstrates its impenetrable force of destruction;
A sea of humanity,
The woeful cries of fleeing people resemble those of wailing spirits!
Amidst all this confusion,
Men, women, old, and young,
Their faces are a sheet of pale:
Some mourn the loss of decades of savings and property;
Others weep by the streets,
Uncertain of the whereabouts of separated family members!

Whether natural disaster
Or human calamity,
The hearts of thousands of fire victims
Have been shattered by the cruel inferno.

‘Fiery Plunder’ by Tian Liu. *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, 2 June 1961.

Abstract

By 1970, Singapore's urban landscape was dominated by high-rise blocks of planned public housing built by the People's Action Party government, signifying the establishment of a high modernist nation-state. A decade earlier, the margins of the City had been dominated by kampongs, home to semi-autonomous communities of low-income Chinese families which freely built, and rebuilt, unauthorised wooden houses. This change was not merely one of housing but belied a more fundamental realignment of state-society relations in the 1960s. Relocated in Housing and Development Board flats, urban kampong families were progressively integrated into the social fabric of the emergent nation-state. This study examines the pivotal role of an event, the great Kampong Bukit Ho Swee fire of 1961, in bringing about this transformation. The redevelopment of the fire site in the aftermath of the calamity brought to completion the British colonial regime's 'emergency' programmes of resettling urban kampong dwellers in planned accommodation, in particular, of building emergency public housing on the sites of major fires in the 1950s. The PAP's far greater political resolve, and the timing of and state of emergency occasioned by the scale of the 1961 disaster, enabled the government to rehouse the Bukit Ho Swee fire victims in emergency housing in record time. This in turn provided the HDB with a strategic platform for clearing other kampongs and for transforming their residents into model citizens of the nation-state. The 1961 fire's symbolic usefulness extended into the 1980s and beyond, in sanctioning the PAP's new housing redevelopment schemes. The official account of the inferno has also become politically useful for the government of today for disciplining a new generation of Singaporeans against taking the nation's progress for granted. Against these exalted claims of the fire's role in the Singapore Story, this study also examines the degree of actual change and continuity in the social and economic lives of the people of Bukit Ho Swee after the inferno. In some crucial ways, the residents continued to occupy a marginal place in society while pondering, too, over the unresolved question of the cause of the fire. These continuities of everyday life reflect the ambivalence with which the citizenry regarded the high modernist state in contemporary Singapore.

Acknowledgments

Among the early responses to my PhD research outside of the Asia Research Centre, where I was based, was a common feeling that ‘the Bukit Ho Swee fire had nothing to do with the making of modern Singapore’. Upon the completion of this study, I am pleased to say that, in addition to having made a cogent argument for my thesis, even the sceptics have made some form of contribution towards my work.

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Abbreviations

ARP	Air Raid Precaution
<i>BH</i>	<i>Berita Harian</i>
BHSFNRF	Bukit Ho Swee Fire National Relief Fund
BHSSSC	Bukit Ho Swee Social Service Centre
BMA	British Military Administration
CC	City Council
CC ABSD	City Council Architect and Building Surveyor's Department
CC ED	City Council Engineer's Department
CC HD	City Council Health Department
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CID	Criminal Investigations Department
CO	Colonial Office
DOE	Department of Education
EDB	Economic Development Board
FD	Fire Department
FMS	Federated Malay States
FO	Foreign Office
gpm	gallons per minute
GRC	Group Representation Constituency
HB/HDB	Housing and Development Board
MC	Ministry of Culture
MCA	Malayan Chinese Association
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MD	Medical Department
ME/MOE	Ministry of Education
MOF	Ministry of Finance
MLW	Ministry of Labour and Welfare
MLGLH	Ministry of Lands, Local Government and Housing
MND	Ministry of National Development
MP	Member of Parliament
MRCA	Monthly Review of Chinese Affairs
<i>MT</i>	<i>Malaya Tribune</i>

MUP	Main Upgrading Programme
NAS	National Archives of Singapore
NC	Nazareth Centre
<i>NFWP</i>	<i>Nanfang Wan Pau</i>
<i>NYSP</i>	<i>Nanyang Siang Pau</i>
OHC	Oral History Centre
PA	People's Association
PAP	People's Action Party
PRO	Public Relations Office
PS	Permanent Secretary
RCS	Radio Corporation of Singapore
RG	Record Group
SADA	Singapore Attap Dwellers' Association
SBC	Singapore Broadcasting Corporation
<i>SCJP</i>	<i>Sin Chew Jit Poh</i>
SCPA	Singapore Country People's Association
SCSS	Singapore Council of Social Service
SERS	Selective En Bloc Redevelopment Scheme
SFA	Singapore Farmers' Association
SFB	Singapore Fire Brigade
<i>SFP</i>	<i>Singapore Free Press</i>
SIT	Singapore Improvement Trust
SJRO	Singapore Joint Relief Organisation
<i>SLAD</i>	<i>Singapore Legislative Assembly Debates</i>
<i>SM</i>	<i>Singapore Monitor</i>
<i>SPD</i>	<i>Singapore Parliamentary Debates</i>
SPF	Singapore Police Force
SRRA	Singapore Rural Residents' Association
SS	<i>Singapore Standard</i>
<i>ST</i>	<i>Straits Times</i>
SWD	Social Welfare Department
SWHDA	Singapore Wooden House Dwellers' Association
TOL	Temporary Occupation Licence
UMSU	University of Malaya Students' Union

Glossary of Terms and Phrases

本性不坏	‘Their nature was good’ in Mandarin
半天	‘Halfway into the sky’ in Mandarin
趁火打劫	‘Taking opportunity of a fire to rob’ in Mandarin
吃什么头路?	‘What is your livelihood?’ in Mandarin
顶呱呱	‘Very good’ in Mandarin
河水山	Bukit Ho Swee in Mandarin
黑区	‘Black area’ in Mandarin
很自由, 很自在	‘Very free, very carefree’ in Mandarin
轰轰的	‘Hot’ in Mandarin
火不会认识你跟我	‘The fire would not distinguish between you and me’ in Mandarin
见惯不怪	‘You grow accustomed to what you frequently see’ in Mandarin
空前大火	‘The unprecedented inferno’ in Mandarin
你们灾民住屋子一定是不必付房租吗?	‘Are you fire victims living in the flats sure that you don’t have to pay rent?’ in Mandarin
上上下下	‘Regulars’ in Mandarin
失去家园	‘Lost homes’ in Mandarin
天阴之别	‘Vast difference’ in Mandarin
我们没有路可以走了	‘We had no other roads to walk’ in Mandarin
乡村	Village in Mandarin
又是好象河水山	‘Just like another Bukit Ho Swee’ in Mandarin
这种话你不可说	‘This sort of things you cannot say’ in Mandarin
终身注定	‘Life is fated’ in Mandarin
最有人情味	‘A warm place to live in’ in Mandarin

<i>ah long</i>	‘Loan shark’ in Hokkien, an unlicensed moneylender who makes unsecured loans at high interest rates
<i>amah</i>	Female domestic servant
<i>ang chia</i>	‘Red car’ in Hokkien, referring to the riot truck
<i>attap</i>	Thatched roof usually made of dried nipah leaves
<i>bang kali</i>	Hokkien corruption of ‘Bengali’
<i>bee hoon</i>	Rice vermicelli
<i>beo</i>	Temple in Hokkien
<i>bo bian</i>	‘Hopeless’ or ‘no choice’ in Hokkien
<i>bo lang, bo lang, kin</i>	‘No one here, no one, quick!’ in Hokkien
<i>bodoh</i>	‘Stupid’ in Malay
<i>bo cheng hu</i>	‘There was no government’ in Hokkien
<i>bo ho sor chai</i>	‘Bad place’ in Hokkien
<i>bukit</i>	Hill in Malay
<i>chai tow kway</i>	Local light dish, rice flour stir fried with eggs and radish, also known as carrot cake
<i>chap ji ki</i>	Twelve-digit Chinese lottery
<i>chap lak lau</i>	‘16 storeys’ in Hokkien, referring to a 16-storey building
<i>che lor</i>	‘Find a road’ in Hokkien
<i>chee cheong fun</i>	Local light dish, rice noodle roll
<i>cheng tng</i>	Local dessert, fruits and seeds in a sweet syrup
<i>chin chai</i>	‘Easygoing’ in Hokkien
<i>curry puff</i>	Local snack, fried pie with curry, chicken and potatoes
<i>di siao siao</i>	‘Mischievous’ or ‘deviant’ in Hokkien
For Seng	‘Fire City’ in Cantonese, referring to the City Gas Works at Kallang and more generally to the locality
<i>char bee hoon</i>	Fried rice vermicelli
<i>char kway teow</i>	Thick, flat rice noodles stir-fried in dark soy sauce with fish cake, cockles, and Chinese sausage or beef
<i>gado gado</i>	Local vegetable salad served with peanut sauce dressing
<i>gong</i>	‘Stunned’ in Hokkien
<i>goo li</i>	Coolie or labourer in Hokkien
<i>gu ni te</i>	‘Milk pigs’ in Hokkien
<i>gua</i>	‘Evict’ in Hokkien
Guanyin	The Goddess of Mercy in Mandarin
Ho Chui Sua	Bukit Ho Swee in Hokkien

<i>hock chap</i>	‘Complicated’ in Hokkien
Hong Lim Pa Sat	‘Hong Lim Market’ in Hokkien, referring to Covent Garden
<i>hong kau</i>	‘Christian’ in Hokkien
Hungry Ghosts Festival	Chinese festival on the fourteenth day of the seventh lunar month celebrating the spirits and ghosts leaving the lower world to visit the living
<i>hwei</i>	Local informal system of rotating credit, also called tontine
<i>ikan bilis</i>	Deep fried anchovies
<i>jaga</i>	Indian watchman
<i>jalan</i>	‘Walk’ in Malay
<i>jin cham</i>	‘Very difficult’ in Hokkien
<i>jit bang bua tia</i>	‘One bedroom and half a living room’ in Hokkien, referring to an improved 1-room HDB flat
kampong	Village in Malay
<i>kangkong</i>	Local species of leafy green vegetables
<i>karang guni</i>	Local rag and bone collectors who visit residences door-to-door
<i>killer litter</i>	Litter thrown from a high-rise flat
<i>kong</i>	‘Panicked’ in Hokkien
<i>kua tau lui</i>	‘Protection money’ in Hokkien, fee which secret societies extorted from businesses
<i>kua liao du lan</i>	‘If I see them, I get very angry’ in Hokkien
<i>kway</i>	Generic term for local light dish or snack
<i>lah</i>	Local colloquial term added at the end of sentence for emphasis
<i>laksa</i>	Rice noodles cooked in coconut curry gravy, frequently with shrimp and cockles
<i>long sai</i>	Cantonese corruption of ‘alongside’, referring to shipyard cleaner
<i>longkang</i>	Drain in Hokkien
<i>lua hiong</i>	‘Very impressive’ in Hokkien
<i>luan kong</i>	‘Wild talk’ in Hokkien
Ma Kau Thiong	‘Macau Cemetery’ in Hokkien, referring to Tiong Bahru Cemetery, formally known in Mandarin as Lu Ye Ting and in Hokkien as Loke Yah Teng
Merdeka	‘Independence’ in Malaya
Mid-Autumn Festival	Chinese festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month celebrating family reunion. Also known as the

	Mooncake Festival
Mukim	Malay term referring to subdivision of a district
Nanyang	‘The South Seas’ in Mandarin, referring to the Southeast Asian region
<i>ohayo gozaimasu</i>	‘Good morning’ in Japanese
Or Kio Tau	‘At the head of the black-painted bridge’ in Hokkien, referring to the part of Havelock Road before the Delta Circus
<i>otah</i>	Local snack, spicy fish cake grilled in banana leaf
<i>pah chiu chia</i>	‘Robbery vehicle’ in Hokkien
<i>pai kia</i>	‘Bad kids’ in Hokkien, referring to delinquent youth or gangsters
<i>pai mia</i>	‘Has a hard life’ in Hokkien
<i>pang keng</i>	‘Sleeping quarters’ in Hokkien, referring to common rooms shared by low-income Chinese workers in the Central Area
<i>parang</i>	Malay equivalent of the machete
Po Tui	‘Town area’ in Hokkien, referring to the Central Area or Chinatown
Qing Ming Festival	Chinese festival to remember and honour one’s ancestors, which involves, among other things, the burning of joss sticks and paper. Also known as All Souls Day.
<i>rojak</i>	Local fruit and vegetable salad served in thick dark prawn paste
<i>samseng</i>	‘Gangster’ in Hokkien
<i>si</i>	‘Die’ in Hokkien
Si Kah Teng	‘Four-legged pavilion’ in Hokkien, local term for Kampong Tiong Bahru
Sio Po	‘Small Town’ in Hokkien, referring to the part of the Central Area north of the Singapore River
<i>soon kueh</i>	Local light dish, vegetable dumpling
taman	‘Garden’ in Malay
<i>tau suan</i>	Local dessert, soft soya bean curd in sweet syrup
<i>tey gu</i>	‘Earth bulls’ in Hokkien, local term for the Ministry of Health’s Hawker Inspectors
Ti Kong	The Heavenly God in Hokkien
Ti Kong Tua	Temple of the Heavenly God
<i>ti lam</i>	Mattress in Hokkien
<i>tikam tikam</i>	Local gambling game commonly played by children and youths

<i>tiao lau</i>	‘Jumping off a building’ in Hokkien, referring to high-rise suicide
<i>toh poon</i>	Swill collection in Hokkien
<i>tong kor</i>	‘Painful bitterness’ in Hokkien
<i>tongkang</i>	Local cargo carrying craft
<i>towgay</i>	Bean sprouts in Hokkien
<i>towkay</i>	Employer in Hokkien
<i>tu tu</i>	Local snack, rice flour with ground peanut or shredded coconut filling
Tua Po	‘Big Town’ in Hokkien, referring to the part of the Central Area south of the Singapore River
<i>Tua Pui Mah</i>	‘Fat Grandma’ in Hokkien
<i>twakow</i>	Light local craft for loading and unloading goods along the Singapore River
<i>ultra vires</i>	‘Outside one’s jurisdiction’ in Latin.
<i>Wa m chai</i>	‘I don’t know’ in Hokkien
<i>Wah</i>	Local term added at the end of sentence for emphasis
<i>yong tau foo</i>	Chinese soup dish with stuffed bean curd and other vegetables

Introduction

Singapore under the People's Action Party (PAP) government became a quintessential symbol of modernity and responsible governance in the mid-twentieth century. Since coming to power at the end of the 1950s, the party leadership has held the belief, as long-time Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew told the nation's workers in 1967, that 'change is the very essence of life', and '[t]he moment we cease to change...we have begun to die'.¹ Similarly, Devan Nair, another member of the PAP Old Guard, surmised, 'Unlike the pre-modern man who dreamed of the world he had left, modern man must dream of the world he will make'.² These statements indicated that the PAP's philosophy of governance was, as James Scott maintained, 'high modernist', deeply rooted in a

self-confidence about scientific and technical progress, the expansion of production, the growing satisfaction of human needs, the mastery of nature (including human nature), and above all, the rational design of social order commensurate with the scientific understanding of natural laws.³

This study is a social history about the making of modern Singapore in the pivotal years after World War Two.⁴ The period's tumultuous history has

¹ Lee Kuan Yew, Speech at the 4th Delegates' Conference of the National Trades Union Congress on 26 Apr 1967, from National Archives of Singapore, Speech-Text Archival and Retrieval System, <http://stars.nhb.gov.sg/stars/public>, accessed 15 Apr 2008. Lee was Singapore's Prime Minister from 1959 until November 1990, when he stepped down to serve as Senior Minister. He is presently Minister Mentor in the PAP cabinet.

² Devan Nair, *Not by Wages Alone* (Singapore: National Trades Union Congress, 1982), pp. 274-5. Nair was long-time Secretary-General of the National Trades Union Congress, and then President of Singapore from 1981 to 1985.

³ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 4. By high modernism, Scott refers to a rationalist philosophy of social governance commonly adopted by centralised states in the modern era. High modernist governments seek to organise society according to geometric principles and remove the visual 'messiness' which is typical of autonomous communities. The desire for a planned social order, he argues, is evident in modern forms of language, civic administration and city planning, and reflects the established scientific belief that progress is both possible and necessary. High modernist governance often fails, Scott maintains, because it suppresses *metis*, the local knowledge which autonomous communities possess and which is integral to their development.

⁴ Social history has hitherto focussed on the prewar period. See James Francis Warren's *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880-1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003) and *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore, 1870-1940* (Singapore: Singapore

customarily been understood in terms of an idealistic struggle between the political elites, namely, the British colonial regime and the PAP,⁵ and more recently, the socialist left.⁶ By contrast, this study goes well beyond the elite politics to examine four integral elements of social change: the development of public housing which was the emblematic architectural form of mid-twentieth century modernism; the state utilising the planned housing to forge an organised, progressive nation; the kampong community which experienced the crucial first step in this official campaign of clearance and rehousing; and finally, the event which made this entire transition and transformation of Singapore possible.

The event in question is the Kampong Bukit Ho Swee fire of 25 May 1961. At a time when serious fires in settlements of unauthorised wooden housing in Singapore City were almost annual occurrences, the Bukit Ho Swee calamity was by far the greatest inferno in the island's history, destroying 2,200 wooden houses and rendering nearly 16,000 people, mostly low-income Chinese families, homeless. What the local newspapers then aptly described as an 'unprecedented inferno'⁷ drew an equally monumental response from the PAP government; within a year of the fire, the Housing and Development Board (HDB), the statutory housing authority, had

University Press, 2003); Katherine Yeo Lian Bee, *Hawkers and the State in Colonial Singapore: Mid-nineteenth Century to 1939*, unpublished M.A. Thesis, Department of History, Monash University, 1989; Paul H. Kratoska, *The Japanese Occupation of Malaya: A Social and Economic History* (London: C. Hurst, 1998); Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment*, 2nd edition (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); and Loh Kah Seng, 'Beyond Rubber Prices: Negotiating the Great Depression in Singapore', *South East Asia Research*, 14 (1), 2006. An exception is Stephen Dobbs, *The Singapore River: A Social History 1819-2002* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

⁵ For academic history, see Yeo Kim Wah, *Political Development in Singapore, 1945-55* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1973); C. M. Turnbull, *A History of Singapore, 1819-1988*, 2nd edition (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1989); Yeo Kim Wah and Albert Lau, 'From Colonialism to Independence, 1945-1965', in Ernest Chew and Edwin Lee (eds), *A History of Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1991); and Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998). Other influential books on Singapore's recent political history are the two officially commissioned works, John Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle for Success* (Singapore: Times Book International, 1984) and Dennis Bloodworth, *The Tiger and the Trojan Horse* (Singapore: Times Book International, 1986), as well as Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 1998).

⁶ See C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'The Vanquished: Lim Chin Siong and a Progressivist National Narrative', in Lam Peng Er and Kelvin Y. L. Tan (eds), *Lee's Lieutenants: Singapore's Old Guard* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1999); T. N. Harper, 'Lim Chin Siong and the "Singapore Story"', in Tan Jing Quee and Jomo K. S. (eds), *Comet in Our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History* (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 2001); and Liew Kai Khiun, 'The Anchor and the Voice of 10,000 Waterfront Workers: Jamit Singh in the Singapore Story (1954-63)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35 (3), Oct 2004.

⁷ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961; *SJCP*, 26 May 1961.

successfully achieved Lee Kuan Yew's target of rehousing the fire victims in modern flats built on the fire site. A number of official epithets such as a 'blessing in disguise'⁸ and a 'God-sent opportunity'⁹ have subsequently been associated with the disaster and elevated it to a prominent place in the official narrative of national history, the Singapore Story.¹⁰ The second volume of Lee's memoirs, published in 2000, got the basic facts wrong but rightly underscored the historic significance of the inferno to the PAP's political survival in the early 1960s and, by implication, Singapore's progress from 'Third World to First'.¹¹ The fire had 'established' the superiority of high modernist public housing over traditional wooden dwellings as an architectural form and, more generally, how the PAP leadership could scientifically predict, manage and resolve any manner of national crisis. Set against this backdrop, this study seeks to explain what the 1961 inferno really meant to the government, the fire victims and the young nation at that crucial point in time.

Fires in History

Fires are deeply interwoven into the fabric of human history. This study addresses the important question of how Bukit Ho Swee and other kampongs within the limits of Singapore City became vulnerable to fire in the 1950s. The outbreak of an inferno, which invariably straddles the grey area between natural cause and human responsibility, is merely a 'trigger', symptomatic of longer-term pressures in society which are demographic, social, economic, environmental, and consequently, historical in nature.¹² Fires indicate the balance of state-society relations at a moment in time: they reveal the state's efforts to manage a deep-seated hazard and, conversely, a community's ability to build effective social networks to cope with the threat.¹³ For instance, the 1911 Triangle Fire in New York galvanised the labour

⁸ HDB, *Bukit Ho Swee Estate* (Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1967), p. 39.

⁹ HB 1013/50 Vol. I, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to CEO, HDB, 4 Dec 1963.

¹⁰ *ST*, 29 May 1997.

¹¹ Lee Kuan Yew, *From Third World to First: The Singapore Story: 1965-2000* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings and Times Editions, 2000), p. 344. The book stated that the fire occurred in June 1960 and rendered 30,000 squatters homeless.

¹² Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, Ian Davis, and Ben Wisner, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 21-45.

¹³ Mark Pelling, *The Vulnerability of Cities: Natural Disasters and Social Resilience* (London: Earthscan Publications, 2003), pp. 77-90.

movement's fight for safer working conditions in garment factories.¹⁴ The deaths of over a hundred girls working in the unsafe factory building, many forced to jump off the burning structure, led the city's hitherto conservative politicians to embrace the 'spirit of progress'.¹⁵ Conversely, in seventeenth century Edo, the city's population coped with the constant threat of fire by building houses which could be easily moved in case of such an event.¹⁶ A study of the threat and outbreak of kampong fires in postwar Singapore similarly provides us with an insight into the relationship between the state and wooden house dwellers, and the latter's efforts to cope with the urban fire hazard.

Urban fires also create states of emergency and, consequently, pragmatic moral opportunities for the government to permanently remove what had been physically destroyed and to forge on the fire victims' behalf a new way of life and society. The destruction of London by fire in 1666 enabled the monarchy to expand its administrative reach through large-scale, planned redevelopment projects such as street improvement and housing construction. These strictly implemented measures, made possible by the scale of the emergency, in effect strengthened the king's political authority vis-à-vis that of the landlords and labour guilds. The role of the London fire, and by implication the monarch, in eradicating the city's 'dirt, overcrowding, squalor, and general unwholesomeness' is similar to the elevated place the Bukit Ho Swee fire, and the PAP, have managed to obtain in the public imagination in the making of modern Singapore.¹⁷ In Edo, too, the Tokugawa regime typically relocated great numbers of people and reparable large plots of land in the aftermath of conflagrations.¹⁸ The question of for whom a fire truly constitutes a crisis needs to be studied closely. In particular, the Singapore case can be usefully compared to the experience of another British colony nearby, Hong Kong, where a public housing programme emerged from a series of severe fires in

¹⁴ John F. McClymer, *The Triangle Strike and Fire* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998).

¹⁵ Dave von Drehle, *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003), pp. 212-18.

¹⁶ Jordan Sand, 'The Logic of the Burnable City: Movable and Immovable Property in Edo-Tokyo', paper presented at the conference, *Natural Disaster in Asian History, Culture, and Memory*, National University of Singapore, 26-28 Aug 2005, pp. 15-27.

¹⁷ Walter George Bell, *The Great Fire in London in 1666* (London: The Bodley Head, 1951), pp. 243-98.

¹⁸ Sand, 'The Logic of the Burnable City', p. 7.

slums of wooden housing both before and after the great Shek Kip Mei blaze of 1953.¹⁹ Much has been written about the politics of public housing in Singapore in the PAP era by political scientists, geographers and sociologists.²⁰ But the subject requires a proper historical treatment, one which traces the origins and development of public housing in the context of kampong clearance and fires, and bridges the postwar colonial and PAP periods.

Of particular importance was the controlling nature of the official discourse of emergency, clearance and relocation which accompanied the public housing programme. Crisis was a predominant trope in the official and semi-official writings on the city-state's rapid population growth, unemployment problem, and most crucially, the insanitary, overcrowded private housing in the postwar years.²¹ Such works were, really, a form of 'reform literature' meant to justify a complete overhaul of Singapore society.²² Exemplary among them is Barrington Kaye's classic study of low-income Chinese households living along Upper Nankin Street in the Central Area in 1956. Kaye's detailed notes about the overcrowded cubicles and lack of adequate light, air flow, waste disposal system, and cooking facilities in the shophouses lining the street reveal how he, as a social reformer, was not simply providing disinterested description but rather was presenting a 'problem' ahead of a

¹⁹ Alan Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei Myth: Squatters, Fires and Colonial Rulers in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), p. 189.

²⁰ For works on the wider political and economic role of HDB housing, see Iain Buchanan, *Singapore in Southeast Asia: An Economic and Political Appraisal* (London, Bell, 1972); Robert E. Gamer, *The Politics of Urban Development in Singapore* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972); Cedric Pugh, 'The Political Economy of Public Housing', in Kernial S. Sandhu & Paul Wheatley (eds), *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989); M. Castells, L. Goh and R. Y.-W. Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome: Economic Development and Public Housing in Hong Kong and Singapore* (London: Pion, 1990); Linda Low, 'The Political Economy of the Built Environment in Singapore', *Solidarity*, 131/132, Jul/Dec 1991; Christopher Tremewan, *The Political Economy of Social Control in Singapore* (New York: St. Martin's Press; Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1994); Chua Beng Huat, *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* (New York: Routledge, 1997); and Chua Beng Huat, 'Public Housing Residents as Clients of the State', *Housing Studies*, 15 (1) 2000.

²¹ Examples of such 'reform literature' are Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee, 1947* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1948); Social Welfare Department, *A Social Survey of Singapore: A Preliminary Study of Some Aspects of Social Conditions in the Municipal Area of Singapore, December 1947*; J. M. Fraser, *The Character of Cities: Singapore, A Problem in Population* (London: Town and Country Planning Association, 1955); Goh Keng Swee, *Urban Incomes and Housing: A Report on the Social Survey of Singapore, 1953-54* (Singapore: Department of Social Welfare, 1956); and Barrington Kaye, *Upper Nankin Street, Singapore: A Sociological Study of Chinese Households Living in a Densely Populated Area* (Singapore: University of Malaya, 1956).

²² Loh Kah Seng, 'Black Areas: The Urban Kampongs and Power Relations in Postwar Singapore Historiography', *Sojourn*, 22 (1), Apr 2007, pp. 6-8.

pre-formulated plan for societal transformation. Kampong Bukit Ho Swee was similarly depicted by the HDB as ‘an insanitary, congested and dangerous squatter area’, rife with crime and gangsterism, in the course of the Board’s programme of kampong clearance and public housing development in the 1960s.²³ Such semi-autonomous settlements located at the urban periphery, to which large numbers of low-income Chinese families were moving, constituted to the state an encroachment at the social ‘margin’ which was thought to signify the boundary between order and chaos.²⁴ The damning official vocabulary of social transgression and danger, namely, ‘insanitation’, ‘congestion’, ‘crime’, and ‘Black Belt’,²⁵ went hand in hand with the powerful language of societal reform, with particular reference to the state-driven process of ‘emergency’, ‘clearance’ and ‘relocation’.²⁶

The postwar public housing programme in Singapore, then, could be conceived as a ‘spatial form of emergency’.²⁷ The sense of crisis which pervaded the official housing literature supported the ruling elites’ campaign to mobilise families en masse and integrate them into the fabric of the emergent nation-state. The discourse of emergency masked the radical nature of the postwar public housing programme; it gave a powerful moral and social authority to terms like ‘clearance’ and ‘relocation’, which in practice frequently meant the destruction of not only houses but of established social and economic ways of life centering around the residences. The true ‘emergency’ was not, as depicted, the problem of inadequate proper housing, but rather the perceived need to remake postwar Singapore along the lines of a well-organised showcase state; it was an ‘emergency’, albeit politically motivated and expedient, that existed first and foremost in the minds of the politicians, social planners and architects of the high modernist state.

Within this discourse of emergency, the kampong fire held a central place: as a seemingly ‘non-political’ and ‘natural’ event, it provided the ultimate justification

²³ HDB, *Bukit Ho Swee Estate*, p. 39.

²⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), pp. 150-152.

²⁵ SIT, *Annual Report 1954*, p. 14.

²⁶ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 125-132.

²⁷ Gregory K. Clancey, ‘Towards A Spatial History of Emergency: Notes from Singapore’, in R. Bishop, J. Phillips & W. W. Yeo (eds), *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 53.

for the state's policy of intervention and removal of the urban kampongs, and the relocation of their residents to modern flats.²⁸ In short, the term 'fire', like 'emergency', 'clearance' and 'relocation', was an inextricable part of a politically powerful vocabulary and discursive language of societal transformation in postwar Singapore.

The targets of the public housing programme were the families residing in what the British, Labour Front and PAP governments perceived as the dangerous 'black areas' of 'Old Singapore'. While the newly established modern flats were increasingly admired by people in the 1950s, there remained much ambivalence towards moving into such housing because, particularly for lower-income families living in wooden dwellings, the rehousing drastically affected established ways of life. Singapore's case is similar in certain respects to how the bourgeoisie of early nineteenth century Paris perceived the city's labouring class also residing in overcrowded housing as 'dangerous classes', being faceless individuals living a savage and barbarous existence.²⁹ Such perceptions also parallel how the large pool of casual labour in late nineteenth century London, living in similarly desperate conditions, were viewed by the upper classes as 'Outcast London'.³⁰ Likewise, Singapore's kampong dwellers were classified as 'squatters', individuals who were supposedly 'inert' and incapable of establishing themselves in 'proper housing', and who consequently required the forceful intervention of the state. In this context, a severe kampong fire, which empowers the authorities to act on behalf of the victims, also presents the perfect opportunity to physically and socially mobilise and remove the 'squatters', if necessary.

To complement this analysis of the politics of negation and rehousing, this study also seeks to recreate what Kampong Bukit Ho Swee was really like, as opposed to how it was so abjectly represented by the urban planners. While nominally a village with temporary wooden housing typically found in the rural areas of Singapore, Bukit Ho Swee's residents were a highly urbanised and, in some

²⁸ Clancey, 'Towards A Spatial History of Emergency', p. 45.

²⁹ Louis Chevalier, *Working Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, H. Fertig, 1973).

³⁰ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

ways, forward-looking community. The aim here is not to create another set of structural oppositions between the state and the people but rather to understand the latter's semi-autonomous ways of life, as fundamentally rational in this particular social context. In colonial India, what outwardly appeared to be 'the disorder, din, pressing, yelling and shouting' of the peasantry and working class were also basically recognised and understood as rational within their traditional kinship system and culture.³¹ Similarly, against the municipal authorities' measures of social control in prewar colonial Singapore, the responses of the labouring classes ranged from violent struggle to, more commonly, 'strategies of evasion, non-compliance, and adjustment', and were similarly rational within their social and cultural world.³² Such contestation in effect comprises a form of 'everyday politics',³³ or 'infrapolitics' utilising the 'weapons of the weak'.³⁴ Likewise, the urban kampong dwellers in the 1950s possessed both overt and covert, and organised and spontaneous, means of contesting the policies of the powerful. The resistance reveals that kampong residents possessed a clear sense of what was 'just, beautiful and wise' and a desire not to be taken for a fool, as was the case of working class Parisians in the eighteenth century.³⁵ This study explores the lives of key groups of kampong dwellers, including men and women, and also children and youths, and their relationship with family, work and the state at large. In postwar Singapore, as in Belgian cities in the eighteenth century,³⁶ children and youths in low-income families faced great pressure to work at a young age and support the family, but this had serious repercussions on their relationship with society.

In other words, a social history of the urban kampongs of Singapore enables us to foster an approach concerned with both structure and agency, the larger social, economic and political changes taking place after the war, and the responses of

³¹ Ranajit Guha, 'Discipline and Mobilise', *Subaltern Studies VII* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 109.

³² Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*, pp. 14, 67.

³³ Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *Everyday Politics in the Philippines: Class and Status Relations in a Central Luzon Village* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

³⁴ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), and *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

³⁵ Arlette Farge, *Fragile Lives: Violence, Power and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 32, 281.

³⁶ Catharina Lis and Hugo Soly, *Disordered Lives: Eighteenth-Century Families and their Unruly Relatives* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), pp. 132-156.

ordinary people.³⁷ This is particularly important in understanding the full social impact of the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire. The impact of urban disasters in general on vulnerable communities is sometimes devastating and at other times far more complex, but it is, above all, always historically significant. In the great flood of Buffalo Creek, an American mining town in the state of Kentucky, in 1972, the victims suffered both individual and collective traumas, with the result that the community began to fall apart in the aftermath of the calamity.³⁸ In the case of the Triangle Fire, while the tragic blaze led New York's politicians to embrace the spirit of reform, the labour movement itself, in working with the politicians, also became more moderate as a result.³⁹ In other words, to understand the true extent of the Bukit Ho Swee fire's impact requires us to examine how far the life of a formerly semi-autonomous community, and its social and economic relations with the state, were transformed in the wake of the catastrophe. The full story may not be one of the complete destruction of community but a more complex reconstitution in which both modern and customary ways of life co-exist in a state of tension.

Consequently, the theme of change and continuity is integral to the study of the 1961 inferno. It entails mapping both the dynamics and tensions of social life in the Bukit Ho Swee public housing estate which was built on the ashes of the fire site. The estate was organised around rational-geometric principles but small-scale spontaneous urban communities often possess a deep functional order underpinning their dynamic social life, which the purely visual order of planned communities could not effectively accommodate or replicate.⁴⁰ Most studies of life in HDB estates in the 1970s and 1980s, both official⁴¹ and academic⁴², have focussed

³⁷ Recent research on how the interiors of HDB flats were designed suggests that the residents played an important role in forging their social compact with the state. Jane M. Jacobs & Stephen Cairns, 'The Modern Touch: Interior Design and Modernisation in Post-Independence Singapore', *Environment and Planning A*, 40 (3), 2008: 572-95.

³⁸ Kai T. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), pp. 156-245.

³⁹ von Drehle, *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America*, pp. 212-218.

⁴⁰ Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, pp. 132-146; Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities: The Failure of Town Planning* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961), pp. 386-405.

⁴¹ See You Poh Seng and Stephen H. K. Yeh, *The Sample Household Survey of Singapore* (Singapore: Economic Research Centre, University of Singapore, 1967); Stephen H. K. Yeh, *Housing and Development Board Sample Household Survey* (Singapore: Economic Research Centre, University of Singapore and Housing and Development Board of Singapore, 1969); Stephen H. K. Yeh and Statistics and Research Department, Housing and Development Board, *Report on the Census of Resettlement Areas, Singapore, 1968* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1969); Stephen H. K. Yeh and Statistics and Research Department, Housing and Development Board, *Report on the Census*

narrowly on issues of housing satisfaction and neighbourliness. However, this study seeks to assess, more broadly, the degree of change in Bukit Ho Swee Estate's residents' role as citizens of a high modernist state after the fire. This analysis will enhance our understanding of the nature of high modernity in Singapore, where the framework of the 'nation', as manifested in the PAP's uses and regulation of space, is still being 'constructed, reinforced, and challenged' by the citizenry.⁴³ The Bukit Ho Swee case consequently illustrates the nature of the social dynamics and tensions inherent in the development of modern Singapore in the PAP era.

In bringing the past into the present, a study of urban fires also reveals how the sheer scale of destruction often produces powerful social myths. Seventeenth century Londoners, for example, commonly viewed the city's great blazes 'as instruments of the vengeful hand of God' to punish the king's court, which they perceived as rife with moral deprivation.⁴⁴ Such a religious belief reflects, significantly, the uneasy relationship between the character of a particular type of state and society. The myth that the 1871 Chicago inferno was started by a cow kicking over a lamp in a barn in an Irish family home has also been persistent, illustrating the stereotypes of native-born Americans towards the more recent immigrant class.⁴⁵ The same conflagration also helped determine the 'shape of belief' among upper and middle-class Americans about Chicago and other urban centres as 'disorderly' cities, where '[u]rban disorder, whose central theme is the

of Malay Settlement Areas, Singapore, 1967 (Singapore: Economic Research Centre, University of Singapore, 1970); Stephen H. K. Yeh, *Homes for the People: A Study of Tenants' Views on Public Housing in Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1972); Stephen H. K. Yeh (ed.), *Public Housing in Singapore: A Multi-disciplinary Study* (Singapore: Singapore University Press for Housing and Development Board, 1975).

⁴² See Gamer, *The Politics of Urban Development in Singapore*; Peter D. Weldon, John S. Western and Tan Tsu Haung, *Housing and Satisfaction with Environment in Singapore*, Working Paper No. 13, Singapore: Department of Sociology, University of Singapore, 1973; Shimon E. Spiro and Ngiam Tee Liang, *Villagers and Estate Residents: Report of a Survey*, Resource Paper Nos. 4-5, Department of Social Work, University of Singapore, 1976; Peter S. J. Chen and Tai Ching Ling, *Social Ecology of Singapore* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1977); Riaz Hassan, *Families in Flats: A Study of Low Income Families in Public Housing* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1977); Shimon E. Spiro, 'The Relocation of Villagers into Public Housing: Some Suggestive Findings from a Singaporean Study', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, 5 (1-2), 1977; and Tai Ching Ling, *Housing Policy and High-rise Living: A Study of Singapore's Public Housing* (Singapore: Chopmen Publishers, 1988). This list does not include numerous academic theses completed by undergraduates from the University of Singapore in the 1960s and 1970s on the social effects of rehousing.

⁴³ Lily Kong and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of "Nation"* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), p. 211.

⁴⁴ Stephen Porter, *The Great Fire of London* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1996), p. 6.

⁴⁵ Richard F. Bales, *The Great Chicago Fire and the Myth of Mrs. O'Leary's Cow* (Jefferson: McFarland and Co., 2002), p. 76.

breaking of imaginative frames, has in many ways become the frame itself'.⁴⁶ In these cases, the point is not whether such beliefs were true but that they *were* commonly held. The important place of the Bukit Ho Swee fire in the Singapore Story, and also the persistence of social rumours on the 'coincident' nature of the inferno, show that the calamity has, similarly, played its decisive part in determining the 'shape of belief' about modernity in Singapore.

Documents and Memories

As momentous events which shatter the usual calm of social history, fires are much written about and debated, and also well-remembered. They produce both a substantial body of written literature and a rich pool of oral history reminiscences, which have been invaluable for this study. Studies of urban disasters have used oral history, written personal accounts and court records to good effect to vividly recreate the terror of the destruction,⁴⁷ and to examine their impact on the victims,⁴⁸ and on society at large.⁴⁹ The two main sources used here are the declassified records of the Singapore Improvement Trust, the defacto colonial housing authority, held at the National Archives of Singapore (NAS), and oral history interviews. In addition, I have used various local departmental records and reports, particularly from the HDB, the Social Welfare Department (SWD), the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Culture; British, Australian, and American archival records; maps and

⁴⁶ Carl S. Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 279.

⁴⁷ Leon Stein's pioneering work on the Triangle Fire vividly described how the women on the three floors of the burning Triangle building faced the fire and either lived to tell the tale or died. His main source was his interviews with 25 survivors, whom he called his "most treasured collaborators". Similarly, David McCullough's book on the 1889 Johnstown Flood in Pennsylvania, by using a combination of oral history, written personal accounts and court records, recounted the experiences of individuals who were swept up by the water and struggled against or perished in it. Leon Stein, *The Triangle Fire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 216; David G. McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968).

⁴⁸ Kai Erikson's study of the Buffalo Creek flood, for instance, drew upon 650 interviews of the victims soon after the disaster, which provided a close-up shot of the event's traumatic impact. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path*, pp. 9-17.

⁴⁹ David Lowe's work on the 1871 Chicago fire contained eye-witness accounts by the city's social elite, which revealed their perception of the lower-income classes as 'vagabonds', 'cutthroats', 'barbarians', and 'Visigoths'. David Garrard Lowe, *The Great Chicago Fire: In Eyewitness Accounts and 70 Contemporary Photographs and Illustrations* (New York: Dover Publications, 1979), pp. 60, 67, 79.

photographs; Chinese, English and Malay newspapers; audio and audio-visual material; heritage gallery material and public histories; and biographies.

Forty-five years after the event, obtaining access to the Singapore archives was still a task fraught with difficulty, where official gatekeepers frequently hover in the long shadows of the makers of the country's recent past.⁵⁰ In Singapore, a researcher seeking access to classified government records held at the National Archives of Singapore is required by law to obtain the approval of the depositing institution. I wrote to the HDB for access to 25 files listed on the NAS website on the rebuilding of Bukit Ho Swee after the 1961 fire.⁵¹ The Board's corporate affairs department decided, however, that 'as the records contain personal data of identifiable individuals, we are not able to release the records'.⁵² This was despite my willingness to refrain from naming the individuals and my observation that many of the files dealt not with the fire victims but with the administration of housing and social amenities in the estate. Eventually, the assistance of my Member of Parliament, an academic himself, enabled me to obtain partial extracts from eight HDB files which did not contain personal information on individuals. In comparison, the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and the Arts granted me access to 23 Social Welfare Department files, mostly on its relief work for fire victims, including those of the 1961 inferno, subject to the condition that sensitive information would not be released prior to clearance from the Ministry. I agree that, in this case, the safeguard was necessary given the personal and confidential nature of the Department's work.⁵³ Here, fortunately, official control of access has been tempered by a willingness to assist independent pioneering research.

I was unsuccessful with respect to the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Internal Security Department, whose documents are, for security reasons, not deposited at NAS. I explained that information on two important, albeit politically sensitive, issues, namely, police investigations into the cause of the fire and the work

⁵⁰ Loh Kah Seng, 'Presently Seeking the Bukit Ho Swee Fire', in Loh Kah Seng (ed.), *Tangent* special issue, *The Makers and Keepers of Singapore History*, 6 (2), 2007, p. 160.

⁵¹ The HDB files on Bukit Ho Swee are listed at the National Archives website, <http://www.a2o.com.sg/a2o/public/grid/index.html>.

⁵² Email correspondence with HDB, Corporate Development Department, 5 Dec 2006.

⁵³ Email correspondence with the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and the Arts, Administration Branch, 22 Dec 2006.

of the leftwing rural associations in organising wooden house dwellers in the 1950s and early 1960s, were necessary for writing a ‘total history’ of the Bukit Ho Swee fire. I was first told that the records in question could not be found and then by another official that they were still classified.⁵⁴ As a result, I am unable to throw any further definitive light on the cause of the fire, which will continue to remain a historical mystery, in the realm of social rumours and speculation.

Oral history constitutes an extremely important source for this study. The ‘voices of the past’⁵⁵ have been especially useful in understanding wooden house dwellers’ experiences, particularly of intra-city migration, the dynamics of urban kampong life, coping with the fire hazard, the scale and horror of the 1961 inferno, and moving into and growing up in an HDB housing estate. This study draws from more than a hundred interviews I conducted between 2006-2007, largely in Bukit Ho Swee Estate, where many former fire victims still live and where I had spent my childhood and teenage years. I have also used about thirty interviews from the Oral History Centre (OHC) of the National Archives of Singapore, conducted between the early 1980s and 2005. Three quarters of the interview subjects are former urban kampong dwellers but there are also important interviews with individuals whose life and work were inextricably bound up with the 1961 fire: architects, public officials, fire-fighters, artists, grassroots leaders, rural activists, and social workers. In the process of conducting the interviews and using the oral history, I have tried to negotiate between the task of building a collective biography of Chinese urban kampong dwellers in postwar Singapore with particular reference to the social transformation brought about by the fire, and the obvious need to acknowledge differences in experience due to age, gender and income group. As the following chapters will show, the study is based on the diverse voices of males and females, of English, Mandarin and Hokkien speakers (which is an indicator of economic status in Singapore), and of former civil servants, shopowners, hawkers, shipyard cleaners, factory workers, construction workers, general labourers, and home-makers. Where the interview material is of a particularly sensitive nature, I have used pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of my informants.

⁵⁴ Email correspondence with MHA, Policy & Operations Division, 10 Nov 2006; and with Internal Security Department, 24 Feb 2007.

⁵⁵ Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

In one sense though, the passage of time, now more than four decades after the fire, has made balanced oral history work far more difficult. Although some of the OHC interviews were conducted at an earlier moment in time and helped fill part of the gap, most of my informants were postwar baby boomers, presently in their late 50s-70s, with only a handful in their 80s. Consequently, their memories of the kampong and the 1961 inferno would have been based on the experiences of children, adolescents and young adults. The result has been the difficulty of relying solely on oral history to establish the veracity of the experiences of the older age groups, especially of their rehousing in HDB flats after the fire. Where I have discussed elderly people's experiences, they have often come second-hand from the recollections of others, like their children. In this regard, I have been ever mindful to complement the oral history testimonies with written sources.

By contrast, the strength of my oral history work is that being a child in the 1950s was in some important ways significantly different from growing up in present day Singapore. In the kampong, the child's social life was centered much more in the immediate locality in which they grew up, played and studied than would have been the case today. The fact that their early social life mixed both play and work produced an astute awareness and understanding among kampong children of the landscape and environment far beyond their age. Most of my informants remember life in Bukit Ho Swee and the fire vividly, and usefully. As Samuel Seetoh, born in 1944, emphasised, 'I can still remember how the kampong looked like. It is in the "heart disk". Old people always say they forgot where they put the keys or what they did just now but long, long ago, they can still remember because it is in the heart disk'.⁵⁶ Tan Geok Hak, born in 1929, belonged to an older generation, but when I spoke to her in the HDB flat in Bukit Ho Swee Estate where she had lived since 1962, she showed me her old Singer sewing machine, a relic from the kampong days, and two dark green British Army blankets neatly folded in a bag, which were issued to fire victims at the relief centre in the traumatic aftermath of the inferno.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Author's interview with Samuel Seetoh, 27 Apr 2007.

⁵⁷ Author's interview with Tan Geok Hak, 5 Oct 2006.

There have been, admittedly, doubts cast upon the reliability of oral history, most seriously on how memory mutates or erodes over time into a reflection, rather than a pure recollection, of the past; this is shaped by both developments in the individual's life and in society as a whole. The key problem here is that the Bukit Ho Swee fire is not only keenly remembered by people but that a mythic representation of the event has also been created by the PAP government and has frequently appeared in various forms in the local media. In his study of the Chauri Chaura riot in 1922, an event which also holds a pivotal place in Indian national history, Shahid Amin found that the recollections of the incident seven decades later had been tainted by the hegemonic master narrative.⁵⁸ Similarly, in the Singapore case, research on the collective memories of the iconic 1964 race riots have found that the elderly people's personal narratives have often incorporated the central themes of the Singapore Story.⁵⁹ How much of my oral history is independent personal memory and how much is simply a filtered form of the official myth was an issue I constantly encountered and struggled with in the course of my research and writing. Critics of oral history have tended to argue that the presence of any political influence renders the source wholly unreliable. My approach, rather, has been more modest and empirical. I have attempted to distinguish the independent from state-authored parts of individual memory, and I have tried to use the respective fragments to write about both social experiences and social myths.

The study begins by tracing the proliferation of urban kampongs in postwar Singapore with the unhindered movement of low-income Chinese families, who were then either leaving shophouse cubicles in the Central Area or arriving from Malaya and China and settling directly in wooden houses. Chapter 2 examines the origins of one such kampong, Bukit Ho Swee, and the development of semi-autonomous forms of life after the war which caused the authorities to view the kampong as an insanitary, dangerous 'black area'. How Bukit Ho Swee and other urban kampongs were perceived as a threat to the imagined high modernist state and consequently targeted by official discourses and emergency programmes of demolition, clearance and rehousing in the 1950s is the subject of Chapter 3. This

⁵⁸ Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 130.

⁵⁹ Adeline Low Hwee Cheng, 'The Past in the Present: Memories of the 1964 "Racial Riots" in Singapore', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 29 (3), 2001, p. 447.

chapter also examines the resistance of wooden house dwellers, both spontaneous and when organised, to such measures. The prominent role of kampong fires in this deeply contested struggle over the character of the Singapore state is discussed in Chapters 4 and 5, which examine, respectively, the outbreak of severe urban kampong fires in the 1950s, and the extent to which these disasters permitted the state to build emergency housing on behalf of the fire victims.

Chapter 6, which marks the turning point in this study, follows the path of the ‘unprecedented inferno’ which in under seven hours devastated Bukit Ho Swee in May 1961 from the perspectives and experiences of its residents. The next two chapters examine how, within the context of a state of emergency occasioned by the disaster, a new public housing estate emerged in record time on the ashes of the fire site and served as a strategic springboard for the building of a high modernist nation-state in the 1960s. First, Chapter 7 discusses the PAP government’s emergency relief and temporary housing programmes for the fire victims. The next chapter looks at how the Bukit Ho Swee inferno successfully brought together the earlier colonial programmes of emergency housing and the PAP’s own hard-headed approach to the housing problem, allowing the latter to restore the social and political margin and begin the work of integrating families en masse into the fabric of the new nation-state. But, as also discussed in these two chapters, the birth of modern Singapore out of the fire was at times keenly contested by the victims, many of whom objected to the official terms of relocation or speculated angrily over the cause of the fire. The last two chapters highlight the consequences arising from the tensions between the PAP’s determined rehousing policy and the former kampong dwellers’ ambivalence towards the HDB programme. Chapter 9 reveals the ongoing contradictions within Bukit Ho Swee Estate, which manifests both the new aspects of modernity and the vestiges of the kampong’s semi-autonomous ways of life. The final chapter traces the emergence of three different myths of the Bukit Ho Swee fire, which highlight the fundamental ambivalence of the estate’s residents, and Singaporeans in general, towards their role as citizens in a high modernist nation-state.

Chapter 1

Movement into the Margin

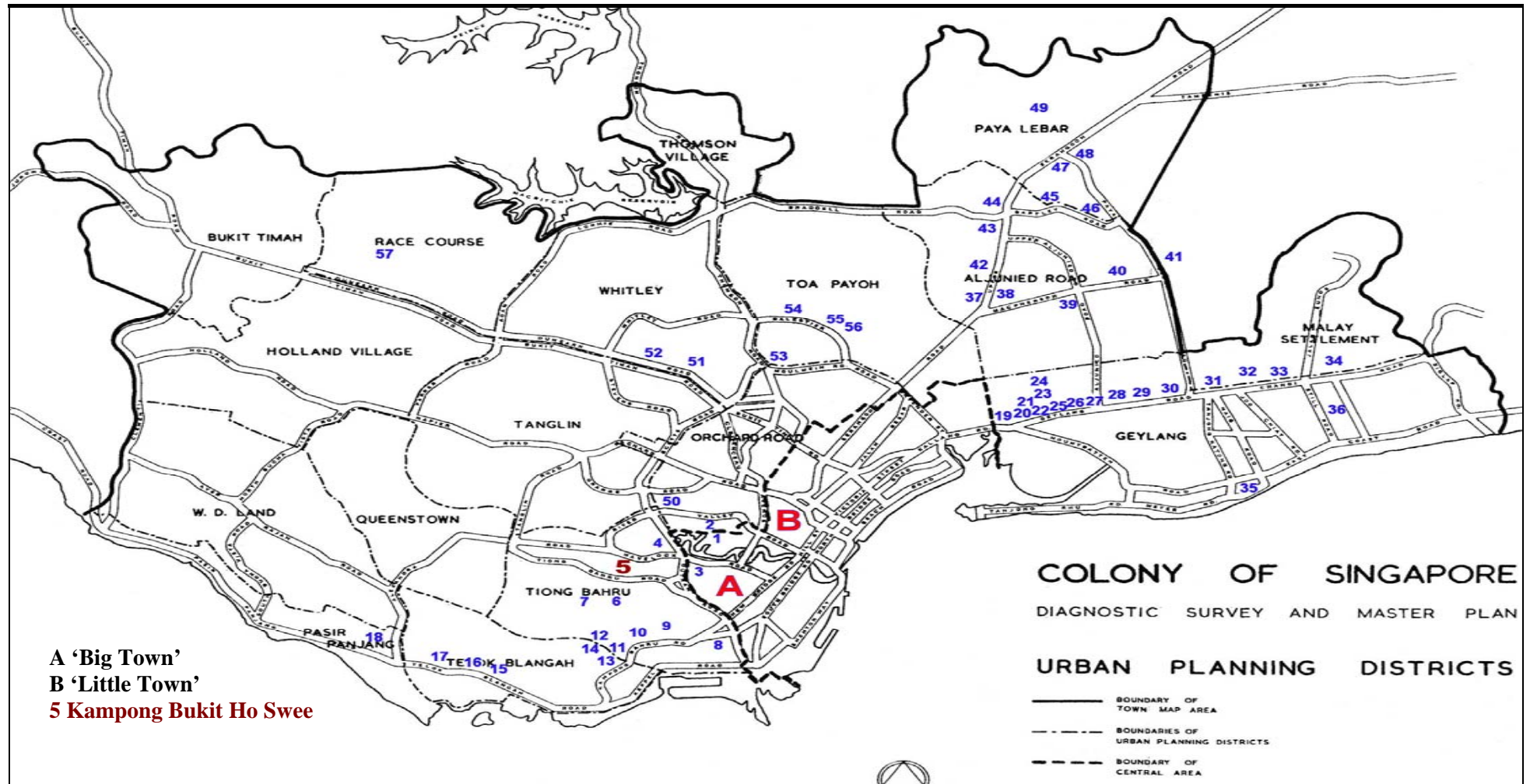
A new urban landscape had materialised in Singapore by the end of the 1950s. At the margins of the City stood a discontinuous belt of more than fifty kampongs (see Map 1.1). Located up to four miles inland from the mouth of the Singapore River, the urban kampongs fanned out of the southern apex of the island along the main radial roads: to the west, along Havelock, Tiong Bahru and Kampong Bahru roads; to the east and northeast, along Kallang, Geylang, Upper Serangoon, and MacPherson roads; and to the north, along Dunearn and Balestier roads. In 1961, 200,000-250,000 people out of an urban population of a million lived in kampongs within City limits: in Bukit Ho Swee, Tiong Bahru, Telok Blangah, and Pasir Panjang in the west; Kallang Basin, the Geylang Lorongs, Paya Lebar, and Siglap in the east; and Toa Payoh in the north.¹ These urban settlements comprised housing constructed of temporary materials like plank, old boxes or scrap metal, with attap or sometimes zinc roofs, which were customarily found in the rural areas. The wooden housing was typically inexpensive, much more closely-built than in the rural areas, constructed without planning approval, and was often but not exclusively rented by lower-income groups. As the Chinese constituted three-quarters of Singapore's population from the beginning of the twentieth century, most kampongs had Chinese majorities, although Malay kampongs also existed at the eastern and western parts of the urban area.²

Behind the expansion of Bukit Ho Swee and other urban kampongs into massive settlements of unauthorised housing was the migratory movement of low-income Chinese families after World War Two. By studying such moves into the urban kampongs, particularly in the Bukit Ho Swee locality, this chapter examines how Chinese attitudes towards housing changed in the postwar years. What resulted were two prongs of migration into the urban kampongs: from the Central Area to the

¹ HDB, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 4. Singapore's total population in 1961 was 1.7 million.

² B. W. Hodder, 'Racial Groupings in Singapore', *Malayan Journal of Tropical Geography*, 1953, pp. 31, 33; R. J. W. Neville, 'The Areal Distribution of Population in Singapore', *Journal of Tropical Geography*, 20, Jun 1965, pp. 21-22.

Map 1.1: Urban Kampongs in Singapore c. 1955



Kampong	Address
1. Pukat	Martin Road
2. Martin	Martin Road
3. Bintang	Havelock Road
4. Covent Garden	Kim Seng Road-Covent Row
5. Bukit Ho Swee-Beo Lane	Havelock Road-Tiong Bahru Road
6. Tiong Bahru	Seng Poh Road-Tiong Bahru Road
7. Henderson	Tiong Bahru Road
8. Pisang	Spottiswoode Park Road
9. Silat	Kampong Bahru Road
10. Bukit Theresa	Kampong Bahru Road
11. Kasita	Kampong Bahru Road
12. Purmei	Kampong Bahru Road
13. Pahang	Kampong Bahru Road
14. Radin Mas	Kampong Bahru Road
15. Ban Siew San	Wishart Road
16. Jagoh	Telok Blangah Road
17. Heap Guan San	Telok Blangah Road
18. Alexandra Terrace	Pasir Panjang Road
19. Bugis	Kallang Road
20. Soopoo	Kallang Road
21. Pulau Minyak	Geylang Lorong 1
22. Lorong 3	Sims Avenue-Geylang Road
23. Koo Chye	Geylang Lorong 3
24. Hock Soon	Geylang Lorong 3
25. Lorong 5	Sims Avenue-Geylang Road
26. Lorong 17	Sims Avenue-Geylang Road
27. Lorong 21A	Geylang Road
28. Lorong 27A	Sims Avenue-Geylang Road
29. Lorong 29	Sims Avenue-Geylang Road
30. Wak Tanjong	Sims Avenue-Paya Lebar Road
31. Engku Aman	Geylang Road
32. Geylang Serai	Geylang Road
33. Kampong Ubi	Geylang Road
34. Eunoss	Geylang Road
35. Amber	Mountbatten Road
36. Lorong K	Telok Kurau-Changi-Road-East Coast Road
37. Marican	Serangoon Road 3 rd mile
38. MacPherson Road South	MacPherson Road
39. Kallang Pudding	MacPherson Road
40. Ampat	MacPherson Road
41. Lorong Tai Seng	Paya Lebar Road
42. Potong Pasir	Upper Serangoon Road
43. Woodleigh	Upper Serangoon Road
44. Bukit Arang	Serangoon Road
45. Bartley Road	Bartley Road
46. Lim Teck Boo	Paya Lebar Road
47. Lew Lian	Upper Serangoon Road
48. Paya Lebar	Paya Lebar Road
49. Chia Keng	Yio Chu Kang Road
50. Teo Chew	Grange Road
51. Pasiran	Gentle Road-Newton Road-Chancery Lane
52. Wayang Satu	Dunearn Road
53. Chia Heng	Thomson Road
54. Ah Hood Road	Balestier Road

55. Boon Teck Road	Balestier Road
56. Jalan Ampas	Balestier Road
57. Chantek Bahru	Dunearn Road

Sources: SIT 808/50, 'List of Kampongs in City Area in Order of Fire Risk', in Memorandum from Superintendent, Singapore Fire Brigade, to Manager, SIT, 27 October 1954; CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1958*, 19-20 May, 1958, pp. 420-22.



Plate 1.1: Wooden houses built over a river in Singapore (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 1.2: Raised wooden houses in an urban kampong, place unknown, c. 1960s (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

urban fringe and directly from outside Singapore. The largely unhindered movement rendered the margins of the City fluid and unstable, as large settlements of

unauthorised wooden housing emerged on hilly ground, disused cemeteries and over swampy land.

Between Staying and Moving

Were low-income Chinese, historically-speaking, stayers or movers? So much of the documentation on housing in Singapore has been organised around the frame of overcrowding that it seems the obvious answer is the former; residing in overcrowded dwellings clearly presupposes a basic inertia against moving. In the early twentieth century, the British colonial government had become acutely aware of severe congestion in the Central Area, the most developed part of Singapore.³ The Central Area encompassed the southern and northern banks of the mouth of the Singapore River, which the Chinese called Tua Po ('Big Town', see Table 1.1) and Sio Po ('Small Town') respectively. Stretching four miles long between Keppel Harbour and the Kallang River and a mile deep, the Central Area was a tiny area, with its northern and southern banks measuring only 565 and 770 acres respectively. It was the site of the founding of a trading station by Stamford Raffles in 1819 and of Singapore's subsequent development as a colonial entrepot. The Singapore River which cut through it in an east-west direction was the settlement's artery of growth, fed by the regional trade in primary commodities from neighbouring countries bound for the West and manufactures going in the opposite direction.⁴ The Central Area was also the disembarkation point for the mostly poor, lowly-educated and unskilled migrant labourers from China who entered the colony to turn the wheels of commerce, particularly from the end of the nineteenth century, and consequently resided near their workplace along the river and quayside.

Yet this Chinese immigration, comprising a continuous stream of arrivals and departures characteristic of colonial Singapore until the early 1930s, also calls to mind the typical 'sojourner'. Prior to the onset of the Great Depression and the

³ See W. J. Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore* (London: Waterlow and Sons, 1907), and Singapore, *Proceedings and Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Cause of the Present Housing Difficulties in Singapore and the Steps which should be Taken to Remedy Such Difficulties* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1918).

⁴ *Straits Settlements Trade Commission 1933-1934*, Vol. I (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1934), p. 41.

subsequent implementation of colonial controls on immigration, male and female Chinese migrants typically were either singles or married persons whose spouses had remained in China. They were prepared to leave their ancestral villages to work in what they called the Nanyang for a few years before returning home with precious savings, and then possibly renewing the cycle.⁵ Until the 1930s, as Table 1.1 shows, the main factor in Singapore's population growth was not natural increase but the migration surplus of arrivals over departures.⁶ There was, in other words, a contradiction between the predisposition of the Chinese to sojourn to Singapore and, once having arrived, to restrict themselves spatially in the Central Area before making the return journey home.

Table 1.1: Components of Population Growth, 1881-1931

Intercensal Period	Population Increase	Natural Increase	Net Migration Increase
1881-1891	43,857	-30,932	74,798
1891-1901	45,980	-42,542	88,522
1901-1911	75,729	-59,978	135,707
1911-1921	115,037	-35,594	150,631
1921-1931	139,387	18,176	212,211

Source: P. Arumainathan, *Report of the 1970 Census* (1973), Vol. 1, p. 31.

Chinese attitudes towards migration and movement in Singapore must be viewed within the constraints imposed by British planning and the geography of the Central Area, from which the island's development first fanned out. Both factors could be traced to the master plan introduced and directed by Raffles. The Jackson Plan of 1822 envisaged a small developed area around the mouth of the Singapore River, about three kilometres along the seafront and one to two kilometres inland.⁷ The plan stipulated that 'the separate nationalities and provincial groups should inhabit distinct areas of the town'.⁸ North of the river, the plan provided for an administrative and commercial centre, and beyond it, a 'European Town' and 'kampongs' for the Arab and Bugis populations. To the south, there was to be a

⁵ Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Family and Marriage in Singapore* (London: HMSO, 1957), p. 26.

⁶ C. A. Vlieland, *A Report of the 1931 Census and on Certain Problems of Vital Statistics* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1932), p. 32.

⁷ John W. Humphrey, *Geographic Analysis of Singapore's Population* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 1986), p. 2. There was no 'Malay' quarter since the ethnic group, comprising mainly agriculturalists and fishermen, resided outside the planned area.

⁸ Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey* (Singapore: Printed at Government Printing Office, 1955), p. 8.

‘Chinese kampong’, with a ‘Chulia kampong’ on its western side. The terms of reference used by these early colonial urban planners, ‘town’ and ‘kampong’, indicate a binary conception of social space and pattern of settlement: the former was European, the latter Asian. In implementing this vision, the Jackson Plan carried out the first instance of resettlement in colonial Singapore, relocating ‘lower classes of Chinese’ who had settled on ‘a considerable portion of the sea and river face....which are now demanded by a higher and more respective [mercantile] class’.⁹

However, the social boundaries and physical space between town and kampong were not so simply fixed and maintained in the subsequent course of Singapore’s history. More kampongs subsequently emerged on the island but although ‘probably first occupied by the races whose name they bear’, they were subsequently inhabited by other ethnic communities.¹⁰ By mid-nineteenth century, when the Europeans vacated their overcrowded neighbourhood for more comfortable suburbs on higher ground, it was immediately occupied by the burgeoning Chinese population, who named it ‘Small Town’, in reference to their original quarter south of the river.¹¹ Such a pattern of Chinese residential movement and settlement was significant in signifying their initiative and dynamism in matters of work and residence. In seeking to fulfill their own interests, they had managed in a comparatively short span of time to modify the Jackson Plan. This autonomy of action and movement repeated itself in the mid-twentieth century, when the Chinese attitude towards work and residence was neither simply a willingness to stay put nor a desire to move; rather, it was a blend of both, which operated dialectically, sometimes reinforcing the one, at other times cancelling out the other. Subsequent history shows that the Chinese attitude in Singapore towards movement was in fact one of ambivalence.

⁹ Stamford Raffles’ letter to Captain C. E. Davis, 4 November 1822, in Charles Burton Buckley, *An Anecdotal History of Old Times in Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1965), p. 82.

¹⁰ John Cameron, cited in Hodder, ‘Racial Groupings in Singapore’, p. 27.

¹¹ John Cameron, cited in Hodder, ‘Racial Groupings in Singapore’, p. 30; *Proceedings and Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Cause of the Present Housing Difficulties*, Vol. I, p. A-2; Teo Siew Eng & Victor R. Savage, ‘Singapore Landscape: A Historical Overview of Housing Change’, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 6, 1985, p. 50.

Following their colonisation of ‘Small Town’ in the 1850s, the urban Chinese population is usually understood to be resistant to rehousing. Up to the eve of the Pacific War in 1941, low-income Chinese appeared determined to continue living in small, low-rental cubicles of shophouses, the 2- to 4-storey housing form prevalent in the Central Area. The shophouse was suited to the needs of migrants, for it combined commercial and residential functions – the ground floor was typically used for business while dwellers lived upstairs – at a location where the cost of transport to their workplace could also be minimised. As Brenda Yeoh points out, the Chinese labouring classes thwarted attempts by the Municipal Authority of Singapore to limit the number of cubicles in shophouses to a ‘Sisyphean jugglery’, ‘incapable of challenging the rapidity with which improvised structures of wood, cloth, canvas, matting, sack, and even tea boxes could be put up by cubicle dwellers to demarcate and protect the privacy of their living spaces’.¹² According to James Warren, Chinese rickshaw pullers preferred cramped cubicles and *pang kengs* in lodging houses on both sides of the Singapore River, occupying an area as small as 60 square feet per man.¹³ Admittedly, as Stephen Dobbs observes, Chinese lightermen lived onboard their crafts moored in the river, but this arrangement similarly kept the rentals down and enabled the boatmen to live near their workplace.¹⁴

Government concerns with overcrowding in cubicle housing and its detrimental effects on personal and public sanitation dominated official inquiries into the housing situation at the turn of the twentieth century. In 1907, Professor W. J. Simpson, commissioned to investigate the high birth rates in the City, warned of severe congestion in the shophouses. This he attributed to the Chinese tendency ‘to build horizontally rather than vertically’, by adding new buildings to the back of existing shophouses.¹⁵ A decade later, the 1918 Housing Commission, appointed to investigate housing difficulties in Singapore, pinpointed two ‘Congested Areas’ on the northern and southern banks of Singapore River, parts of which were extremely

¹² Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment*, 2nd edition (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), pp. 143–48.

¹³ James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People’s History of Singapore (1880–1940)* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 40–44, 202–4.

¹⁴ Stephen Dobbs, *The Singapore River: A Social History 1819–2002* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), pp. 84–85.

¹⁵ Simpson, *Report on the Sanitary Condition of Singapore*, p. 12.

overcrowded up to a density of 1,304 persons per acre. Here, both the artisan and labouring classes could live close to their work, near the river, the harbour and the wharves:

It is amongst the poorest class that the struggle for existence is keenest. This class is therefore impelled towards the facilities provided by the Congested Areas. They have to put up with what they can get in the way of a room, or a share of a room, for the only choice is between accepting and giving up the struggle.¹⁶

Just before the advent of World War Two, the 1938 Weisburg Building Committee, studying the possibility of redeveloping the densely-built Crown lands, repeated the caution that the shophouses, intended for single males, had become ‘warrens of cubicles and form slums of the worst description’.¹⁷

Increase in Family Life

The housing congestion in the 1930s was linked to rapid population growth. As the Weisburg Committee observed, the population in certain parts of the urban area had ‘nearly doubled in the last five years’. This population increase was largely brought about by the political turmoil in China and increases in female immigration and, consequently, in family life. The Municipal population had jumped 44% from 360,000 in 1923 to over 520,000 in 1937, while the number of assessed buildings had only risen by half that proportion in that time. Of particular note were increases in the ratio of women to men among the Chinese from 367:1000 to 732:1000 and in births from 3,750 to 18,577. In planning new housing for the low-income dwellers in the urban area, the Committee surmised that the considerations were, most crucially, rent and transport cost, and also marketing cost and ‘the reluctance to move from familiar surroundings and friends’. Nevertheless, inner city residents had already begun moving to the urban margins and even beyond, such that ‘[o]n East Coast,

¹⁶ *Proceedings and Report of the Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Cause of the Present Housing Difficulties*, Vol. I, pp. A-4 - A-6.

¹⁷ SIT 70/41, Report of the Weisburg Building Policy Committee, 1938.

Upper Serangoon, Bukit Timah, Holland, and Pasir Panjang Roads, it is impossible to distinguish the boundaries between the Municipal and Rural Board areas, development being equal on both sides'.¹⁸

The demographic changes documented by the Weisburg Committee had their origins in the official immigration controls which, for the first time in Singapore's history, imposed curbs on the number of arrivals to the colony. During the Great Depression, heavy unemployment and destitution among the unskilled labour led the British colonial government to progressively slash the quota for male Chinese arrivals, until it was fixed at 1,000 persons between June 1932 and May 1933. The policy effectively reduced the number of arrivals to under 28,000 between 1930 and 1933.¹⁹ The quota system, however, did not affect the entry of women or the cost of their passage to Singapore. Between 1934 and 1938, 'shiploads of Cantonese women', mostly from the Shun Tak and Tung Kwun districts and aged between 18 and 40 years, arrived in Malaya. The peninsula received a migration gain of over 190,000 female Chinese deck passengers (out of a total of 460,000 migrants), the majority being peasant women who found work in local estates, industries and factories. Many of them claimed to be widows and eventually settled down and remarried. Wilfred Blythe, the Deputy Controller of Chinese Labour, observed in 1941 'swarms of Chinese children in their teens, mostly local born, and still more who have not yet reached their teens'.²⁰ Between 1934 and 1940, Singapore experienced a natural increase in its population of 141,548 persons.²¹

Of the female immigration, the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT), the defacto colonial housing authority, observed in 1938:

we are at present faced with something in the nature of a social revolution in connection with the Chinese labouring classes. Until a

¹⁸ SIT 70/41, Report of the Weisburg Building Policy Committee, 1938.

¹⁹ Loh Kah Seng, 'Beyond Rubber Prices: Negotiating the Great Depression in Singapore', *South East Asia Research*, 14 (1), 2006, p. 21.

²⁰ W. L. Blythe, *Historical Sketch of Chinese Labour in Malaya* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1953), pp. 29-30; P. Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970, Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 33.

²¹ Singapore, 'Report of the Population Study Group', *Master Plan: Reports of Study Groups and Working Parties* (Singapore: Government Printing Press, 1955), p. 18.

few years ago, such labour came here unaccompanied by wife or family. On the current rates of wages they were able to remit to China sufficient to keep wife and children in comfort in their native village. But with the development of Chinese female immigration, the whole position has changed.²²

One of the arrivals was Chung Lai Cheng, born around 1917 in Kwangtung province, who at the age of sixteen had married a widowed accounts clerk working in Singapore. He returned to Singapore three months after the marriage and four years later, around 1937, Chung and a stepson by his previous marriage followed him there.²³ It was only in 1938 when female migrants, like the men, were subject to a monthly quota of 500 in order to reduce the competition for jobs. By then, the Chinese population had become increasingly settled and consequently a more *mobile* local community.

The new mobility of low-income Chinese families was the result of two opposing social and demographic forces. First, there were the long-standing inhibiting factors which had hitherto restricted Chinese movement away from the Central Area: namely, rent, transport and marketing costs and the reluctance to move away from familiar local surroundings and friends. These factors now came into tension and conflict with new forces which encouraged mobility: local settlement and marriage, the subsequent birth of children, the formation of a nuclear family, and the consequent need to find suitable housing. Between the 1930s and 1960s, Chinese attitudes towards moving outward from the Central Area were influenced by these opposing forces; some favoured relocation while others preferred to stay put, but all felt a degree of pull from both factors.

The increase in Chinese family life became much more pronounced after 1945. What is often not fully appreciated is that the stream of Chinese immigration to Singapore changed significantly in its composition and contributed to the development of a settled Chinese community. Most scholars have emphasised the

²² SIT 692/38, Memo by Chairman, SIT, 11 Aug 1938.

²³ Barrington Kaye, *Upper Nankin Street, Singapore: A Sociological Study of Chinese Households Living in a Densely Populated Area* (Singapore: University of Malaya, 1956), pp. 233-34. Chung worked in a cheroot factory for nearly twenty years.

importance of natural increase over immigration in analysing the character of the postwar population growth. This is true in numerical terms; Table 1.2 shows that immigration no longer accounted for the bulk of the population increase after the 1947 census. Saw Swee Hock has pointed out that, when the population growth was 4.5% in the 1947-1957 period, the net migrational increase accounted for about 1%, and was a negligible factor in the next intercensal period.²⁴

Table 1.2: Components of Singapore's Population Growth, 1931-1970

Intercensal Period	Population Increase	Natural Increase	Net Migration Increase
1931-1947	380,399	178,296	202,103
1947-1957	507,785	395,571	112,214
1957-1970	628,578	595,614	32,964

Source: P. Arumainathan, *Report of the 1970 Census* (1973), Vol. 1, p. 31.

However, a purely numerically-based interpretation ignores the significance of the social impact of the immigration. Leo van Grunsven, in his little-noticed study of intra-urban migration in Singapore, has pointed out that the net migrational increase for the 1931-1947 period was marginally greater than the natural increase, accounting for 53% of the total, and it still comprised 22% in the following intercensal period.²⁵ But what was crucial was not merely the volume of postwar migration but its character, causes and consequences. Whereas the prewar arrivals had come from China mainly to find work, most postwar immigrants were arriving from China and the Federation of Malaya either to join their families or to establish family life in Singapore.

Because emigration was not restricted, there was a net migrational deficit after the war up to 1953 as more people left the colony than those entering it (see Table 1.3). But the composition of the inflows was significant. Of the Chinese arriving from China and Hong Kong in this period, some were motivated by the customary 'push factors' which made life difficult on the mainland; this exodus was exacerbated in October 1949 by the establishment of a communist regime. But, significantly, locally resident Chinese were also asking their families to join them in

²⁴ Saw Swee Hock, *The Population of Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1999), pp. 15-16.

²⁵ Leo van Grunsven, *Patterns of Housing and Intra-urban Migration of Low-income Groups in Singapore, with Particular Reference to Urban Kampong Dwellers: Part 1 Background and General Analysis* (Utrecht: Geografisch Instituut, Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, 1983), pp. 31-33.

Singapore.²⁶ Between 1949 and 1953, most of the 2,300 families who annually entered Singapore were wives with one or two children, or other family members joining their husbands. In this period, 5,000-10,000 more Chinese men left Singapore yearly than those entering, with a slightly smaller surplus of Chinese women and children arriving over those departing. Children formed only about 13% of the immigrants, with the majority being males, who could work and support the local family, while the girls were often betrothed in China.²⁷

Table 1.3: Migration Statistics in Singapore, 1947-1953

Year	Immigration	Emigration	Net Migration
1947	154,145	157,078	-2,933
1948	124,804	155,879	-31,075
1949	110,815	139,563	-28,748
1950	94,722	109,772	-15,050
1951	95,769	124,866	-29,097
1952	95,864	96,597	-733
1953	102,413	103,065	-652

Compiled from Singapore, 'Population', *Annual Report*, 1947-1953.

The pattern of migration from China was consolidated in August 1953. A new Immigration Ordinance was enacted 'with a view to protecting the standard of living and keeping local residents in employment'. The Ordinance limited the entry of adults from China and India to those seeking reunion with their families (wives and children of local residents), to those admitted on compassionate grounds (elderly parents of local residents), and to specialists and professionals whose services were in demand, such as engineers, technicians, teachers, accountants, and doctors.²⁸ The restrictions led to an increase in the arrivals of wives and children of local residents in 1955. The entry of family members from China and India soon stabilised, and was then stymied by amendments to the Ordinance in 1959, which aimed to 'bring about a more balanced and assimilated Malayan population whose ties and loyalty are to this country alone without which the foundation for a true Malayan nation cannot be laid'.²⁹ The amendments prohibited wives and children of local residents from being permanently admitted into Singapore if the man was not a Singapore citizen, if they

²⁶ Singapore, 'Population', *Annual Report 1955*, p. 19.

²⁷ Singapore, 'Report of the Population Study Group', pp. 23-25.

²⁸ Singapore, 'Population', *Annual Report 1953*, p. 17.

²⁹ *ST*, 3 Nov 1959. Before the amendments, children under 15 years of age were allowed to enter.

had been living apart continuously for five years after December 1954, or if the child was more than six years old.

In social terms, the inflow from the Federation of Malaya was as important as the China stream. Although Singapore had administratively separated from the peninsula in 1946, migration between the two countries was unrestricted until the island was expelled from Malaysia in 1965. In November and December 1946, there were 27,834 arrivals from Malaya, against 18,144 migrants from outside the peninsula and 25,356 births.³⁰ In the next two decades, large numbers of people, particularly Chinese, moved south to Singapore. This was due to adverse developments north of the causeway: the twelve year-long Emergency beginning in June 1948; the large-scale, involuntary resettlement of rural Chinese in the 'New Villages'; unemployment due to recession in the tin and rubber industries, in addition to the usual rural-urban drift of persons in search of employment.³¹ In 1949, resettlement operations in Johor, the state closest to Singapore, led to 'sharp reactions in Singapore to squatter evictions'.³² The authorities believed that while accurate statistics on the Singapore-Malaya migration were unavailable, the movement was 'substantial both during and after the Japanese occupation, with the general direction of net migration from the Federation of Malaya to Singapore'.³³ In 1952 and 1953, although the colony experienced small monthly migrational losses of between 300-1,000 persons to countries outside Malaya, they were offset by gains of 500-1,000 persons from Malaya.³⁴ Between 1958 and 1960, there was a net surplus of 6,916 Chinese males and 6,916 females surrendering their Federation passports to take up permanent residence in Singapore, largely Chinese and persons from Johor.³⁵

³⁰ HB 423/46, A Report of the Damage Resulting from the War and the Japanese Occupation, 10 Dec 1946.

³¹ Singapore, 'Report of the Population Study Group', pp. 27-29.

³² A4231/1949/Singapore, Despatch from Australian Commissioner for Malaya to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 16 Mar 1949.

³³ Singapore, 'Population', *Annual Report 1952*, p. 29.

³⁴ Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey*, p. 16.

³⁵ These figures do not include children under 12 years of age, who are exempted from producing passports. The practice of exchanging passports immediately upon a shift of residence was discontinued in June 1961, after which passports would only be issued after a year in residence. The free movement between Singapore and Malaysia ended after separation, when new regulations in 1967 mandated that West Malaysians entering the republic had to possess valid travel documents.

The postwar censuses capture the social composition and impact of this immigration.³⁶ In the 1957 census, there were 515,751 foreign-born persons in Singapore. Of these, 181,329 (or 35%) had arrived in the 1947-1957 period. This group consisted of 88,811 persons (49%) born in the Federation of Malaya and only 39,969 (22%) born in China. Female arrivals were numerically prominent, comprising 41,302 persons (47%) of the Malaya-born and 22,886 (57%) of the China-born. Among children and teenagers between ages 0-19 in 1957, there were 29,009 males and 27,306 females born in Malaya. This was more than twice the 15,426 males and 10,421 females born outside Singapore and Malaya, but roughly the same proportion as the numbers of Malaya-born and China-born persons arriving in the period.³⁷ In the 1970 census, out of a total of 530,883 foreign-born persons, 98,699 persons (19%) had arrived in the 1956-1965 period. This group consisted of 65,284 persons (66%) born in Malaysia and 18,745 (20%) born in China, indicating the increasing numbers of the former. In 1970, the proportion of female arrivals had also risen from the previous census, comprising 36,332 persons (56%) of the Malaysia-born and 12,133 (65%) of the China-born.³⁸ Both censuses indicate the substantial numbers of female immigrants and entrants from Malaya.

The arrival of Chinese from Malaya and China for family reasons was part of a major demographic shift in postwar Singapore, expanding on the population changes begun in the 1930s. During the Japanese Occupation, the island's population had suffered a natural decrease of 14,000 persons.³⁹ After the war, the population quickly settled down, married and bore multiple children, leading to rising numbers of locally-born persons and rapid population growth. The postwar immigration and natural increase, consequently, were not mutually exclusive but were underpinned by a common desire to form families or reunite with local families and consequently reinforced each other. With rising birth rates and falling mortality rates, the Chinese population grew from 418,640 in 1931 to 729,473 in 1947,

³⁶ However, as Saw Swee Hock warns, the census figures do not take into account immigrants who died in the country, returned to their home country or moved to another country in the intercensal period. Saw, *The Population of Singapore*, p. 37.

³⁷ S. C. Chua, *Report on the Census of Population 1957* (Singapore: Printed by Government Printer, 1964), pp. 72-74.

³⁸ Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970*, pp. 81-82. The 1970 census does not provide information on the distribution of the foreign-born population by country of birth and age.

³⁹ Singapore, 'Report of the Population Study Group', pp. 20-21.

1,090,596 in 1957, and 1,579,866 in 1970.⁴⁰ The influx of Chinese women progressively improved the sex ratio from 1,656 men per 1,000 women in 1931 to 1,132 in 1947, 1,039 in 1957, and 1,017 in 1970.⁴¹ More Chinese settled down, married and had children. The nuclear family constituted 67% of all Chinese households in 1957 and 73% by 1970. The size of the nuclear family was 5.41 persons in 1957 and 5.58 in 1970; among the Chinese, the size was 5.10 in 1957 and 5.46 in 1970. In short, a typical postwar nuclear family had three or four children.⁴²

Where the prewar population had comprised largely of working age adults, the average postwar person was younger and more likely to be locally-born. The percentage of Chinese children between ages 0-14 was 37% in 1947, 44% in 1957 and 38% in 1970. The mean age of the Chinese population also fell from 26.9 years in 1931 to 25.1 in 1947 and 23.0 in 1957, before rising to 25.2 in 1970 due to the state-sponsored family planning programme.⁴³

A 1947 survey of 3,841 immigrant Chinese living in the Municipal area found that 72% had not returned to their homelands, while 60% had made no remittances to their families.⁴⁴ Furthermore, 499 out of 977 persons (51%) had not returned or sent remittances home since their first arrival, suggesting that the migrants' attachment to China was 'only partial and somewhat tenuous'.⁴⁵ It is probable some of them brought their wives and children to Singapore after the war.

⁴⁰ Chua, *Report on the Census of Population 1957*, p. 44.

⁴¹ Saw, *The Population of Singapore*, p. 50.

⁴² Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970*, p. 208.

⁴³ Chua, *Report on the Census of Population 1957*, pp. 50-51; Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970*, pp. 54-55.

⁴⁴ SWD, *A Social Survey of Singapore: A Preliminary Study of Some Aspects of Social Conditions in the Municipal Area of Singapore*, 1947, p. 112.

⁴⁵ SWD, *A Social Survey of Singapore*, pp. 120-21.



Plate 1.3: The children of Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, c. 1960. In the background are the SIT's 4-storey housing (Courtesy of Ivan Polunin).

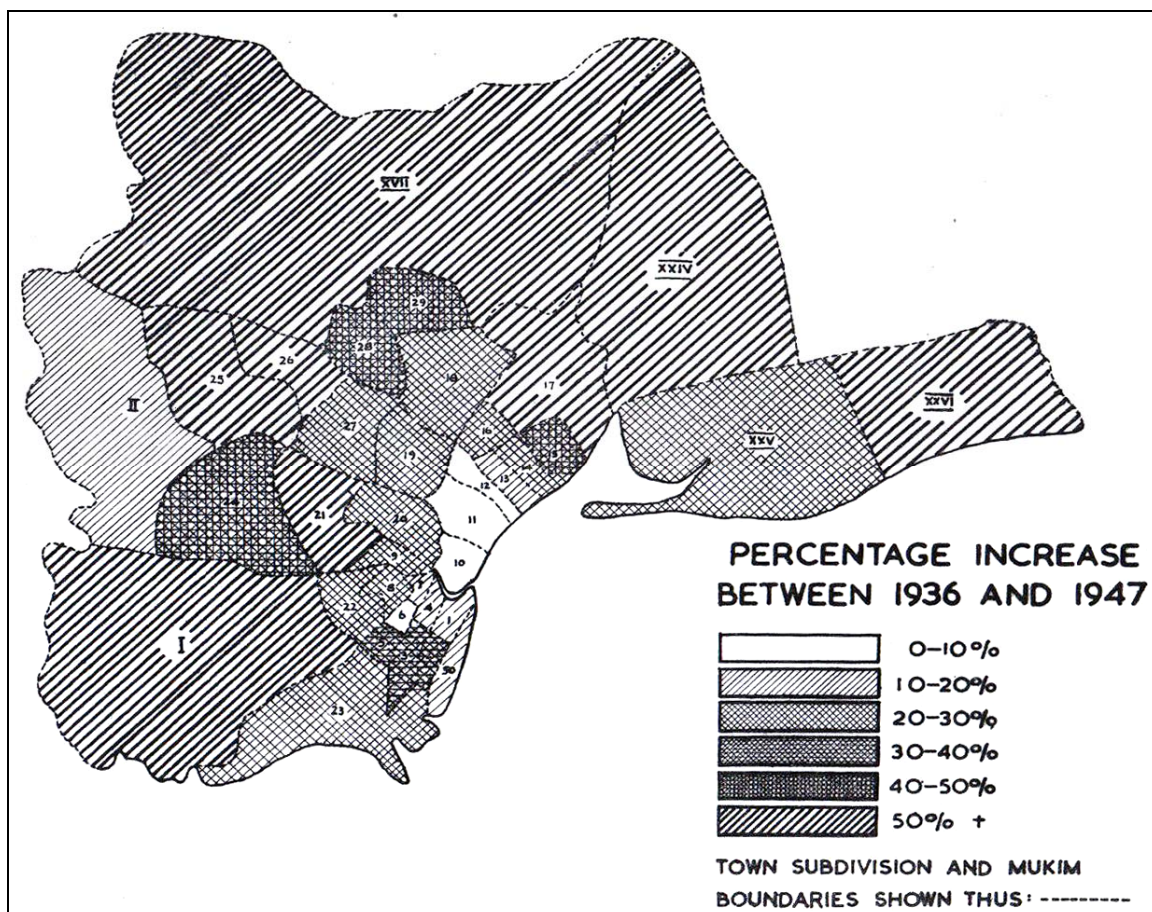


Plate 1.4: Children and youths at the Malayan Chinese Association shophouse along Havelock Road, at the edge of Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, c. 1950s (Courtesy of Wong Pok Hee).

Exodus from 'Pigeon Cages'

Since the mid-1930s, the Chinese population resident in the Central Area had already been feeling the pressure of the increase in family life. Between 1936 and 1947, Chinese families began to move to outlying parts of the City. As Map 1.2 shows, the urban population changes were least in the inner city and greatest in the urban periphery.⁴⁶ While the Central Area's population increased by only about 0-20%, those in the intermediate zones rose by 40-50%. The most dramatic increases, of more than 50%, were in the fringe areas of the City: towards Toa Payoh in the north, Alexandra in the west and Kallang and Siglap in the east.

Map 1.2: Percentage Increase in the Population of Singapore Municipality, 1936-1947



Source: Diagram 3, Singapore, 'Report of the Population Study Group', *Master Plan: Reports of Study Groups and Working Parties* (1955).

⁴⁶ Singapore, 'Report of the Population Study Group', p. 18.

This demographic drift outward was, of course, not new and could be considered natural. From the 1840s, people had been fanning out from the town area along the coastline in both directions and also inland in a northwesterly course. By the 1950s, the urban spread had reached Pasir Panjang, Alexandra, Siglap, and Toa Payoh in the four main directions.⁴⁷ By following the arterial roads leading out of the Central Area, the movers had continuously redefined what was rural or urban, and what had been rural a generation earlier became part of the City proper. In this process, the well-built permanent houses of the upper classes who had left the congested centre for the 'suburbs' were swamped by the more numerous and closely-built unauthorised housing of the low-income group. By the eve of World War Two, numerous Chinese were already living in wooden houses, rearing pigs and growing vegetables outside the Central Area. A British observer viewed these houses as an 'expression of local poverty, easy climate, transient population, and the youth of the whole human development here'.⁴⁸ By 1940, low-income Chinese leaving the Central Area had again blurred the lines between urban and rural, town and kampong.

The urban expansion had historically involved only a small minority of the population but the Japanese interregnum turned the migration into an exodus. The war had destroyed comparatively few residential buildings but more crucially had prevented the maintenance of the surviving homes. In addition, the surge in population after the war was not met by a corresponding increase in housing stock.⁴⁹ Consequently, the Japanese Occupation aggravated the 'very old subject' of the construction of unauthorised wooden dwellings in the urban area:⁵⁰

During the Occupation, much of the land acquired and not yet used was let out by the Japanese, in an endeavour to swell their revenue,

⁴⁷ Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey*, Map No. 4.

⁴⁸ E. H. G. Dobby, 'Singapore: Town and Country', *Geographical Review*, 30 (1), Jan 1940, pp. 95, 100, 102-103.

⁴⁹ HB 423/46, A Report of the Damage Resulting from the War and the Japanese Occupation, 10 Dec 1946; HB 423/46, Comments on Questionnaire Adopted by the Subcommission of the Economic Reconstruction of Devastated Areas, 24 Oc 1946.

⁵⁰ SIT 808/50, Municipal Architect's Scheme for Dealing with the Question of the Execution of Mandatory Orders for Demolition of Unauthorised Attap Dwelling Houses and Resettlement of the Occupiers, 23 Mar 1950.

while other areas were occupied by squatters, against whom apparently no action was taken.⁵¹

The Japanese administration received numerous requests for vegetable cultivation on Municipal and SIT lands. Some of the lands were let out for cultivation and other uses but others, the Japanese revealed, were occupied without authorisation:

Such occupiers have been served with notices to quit or alternatively to apply for permission to occupy the lands on monthly tenancy, and the result is that they except a few have either delivered up vacant possession of the lands, or rented the lands from this Kakari.⁵²

After the war, the SIT found that

[a]fter the Liberation, further areas were let out for such purpose as storing scrap material, and the majority of the tenancies granted by the Japanese were recognised and continued. During this period, still more land was occupied by trespassers, so that with the return of Civil Administration the Trust was faced with the formidable problem of regaining possession of its land and restoring it to order and cleanliness. The Trust has since then acquired further land which is occupied by squatters who were tenants of the former owner.⁵³

During and immediately after the Japanese Occupation, unauthorised wooden buildings were reported to have been erected in places such as Tanjong Katong and along Dunman, Haig and Geylang roads in the eastern part of the City.⁵⁴ In Kampong Henderson in the western half of the City, in-filling rapidly took place due to the exodus of people from the Central Area fleeing the Japanese bombing. The kampong's population reportedly swelled from a few hundred to 5,000 during

⁵¹ SIT, *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947*, p. 31.

⁵² Kanzai-Ka Kanri Kakari 75/2602, Report from 1 Aug 2602 to 31st Mar 2603. 2602 under the Japanese imperial calendar is the year 1942.

⁵³ SIT, *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947*, p. 31.

⁵⁴ Municipal Commission, *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Municipal Commissioners*, 12 Jan 1948.

the war and doubled to 10,000, comprising 1,000 families, in 1947.⁵⁵ The 1947 Municipal survey found that 59% of its 4,965 sampled households had shifted into their present residence between the beginning of the occupation and the time of the survey.⁵⁶ One family displaced by the war was Jimmy Yi's parents, who had married in Johor and fled to Singapore at the start of the Japanese invasion. They eventually moved into a wooden house in Kampong Silat, near the General Hospital, where they brought up Yi (born 1950), his eight brothers and a younger sister.⁵⁷

Yi's case illustrates the migrational patterns which led to the movement of families into the Kampong Bukit Ho Swee locality. Loh Tian Ho, my father, was born in 1936 to a couple living in an attap house in Pasir Panjang, a rural area then, where they grew vegetables. When the Japanese attacked, the family fled the emerging chaos into the City. They rented an attap house in a Chinese kampong in Telok Blangah, just southwest of the Central Area. Later, his mother, *Tua Pui Ma* ('Fat Grandma'), separated from her husband and married a Straits-born Chinese who had arrived from Malacca, Malaya, after the war to look for work. This was *Ah Kong*, my grandfather, who was English-educated and worked as a government clerk. In subsequent years, the family lived in other kampongs in the vicinity, including Bukit Ho Swee itself briefly. They had been living in a wooden house – five members in the family – at the fringe of Bukit Ho Swee along Havelock Road for seven or eight years at the time of the great fire of 1961.⁵⁸

Immediately after the war, the upper storeys of the shophouses in the Central Area were already congested with married workers and their young families.⁵⁹ The Chinese named the cubicles 'pigeon cages'.⁶⁰ Evidently the area had achieved a 'residential stability', having exhausted the possibility of creating more cubicles.⁶¹ The 1947 Municipal survey reported that in 'an area of 2,285 acres or some 11% of

⁵⁵ Joyce Horsley, *Resettlement of a Community: Discussion of the Problems Arising from the Disorganisation of a Community in Singapore*, unpublished academic exercise, Department of Social Studies, University of Malaya, 1956, pp. 81-82.

⁵⁶ SWD, *A Social Survey of Singapore*, p. 68.

⁵⁷ Author's interview with Jimmy Yi, 4 Feb 2007.

⁵⁸ Author's interviews with Loh Tian Ho, 13 Jan 2007 & 2 Feb 2007.

⁵⁹ Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee* (Singapore: Government Printing House, 1947), p. 5.

⁶⁰ Author's interview with Chua Tua Tee, 13 Jul 2007.

⁶¹ Van Grunsven, *Patterns of Housing and Intra-urban Migration Part 1*, pp. 86-87.



Plate 1.5: *Ah Kong* and *Tua Pui Mah* (seated), with my parents flanked by my uncle and aunt, c. 1969 (Photograph by Loh Tian Ho).

the total area of the Municipality, live just under half the population of the whole Municipality', in the three inner city wards comprising the Central Area, between Telok Blangah in the southwest to Serangoon in the northeast.⁶² According to the 1947 Housing Committee, the density in the Central Area, with 300,000 persons crammed into a thousand acres, was 300 persons per acre. This contrasted with a density of 34 persons per acre for the entire Municipal area, with a population of 680,000, and only 2 persons per acre in the rural area, with a population of 244,000.⁶³ In subsequent years, the Central Area's population grew slowly from an estimated 340,000 in 1955⁶⁴ to 402,000 in 1963, an overall increase of 34% between 1947 and 1963.⁶⁵

⁶² SWD, *A Social Survey of Singapore*, p. 24.

⁶³ Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee*, pp. 5, 51.

⁶⁴ Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey*, p. 25.

⁶⁵ Singapore, *Master Plan First Review, 1965: Report of Survey* (Singapore: Planning Department, Ministry of National Development, 1965), p. 37.

In analysing the expansion of the urban kampongs, it is important to situate the event, even one as influential as the Japanese Occupation, within the context of the social and economic geography of urban Singapore. In 1953, the Acting Deputy Lands Manager of the SIT, in trying to deflect responsibility for this development, rightly pointed to more long-standing extenuating factors:

There is a tendency to lay the whole blame for the 'squatter problem' on the Japanese Occupation and by implication on the Government. No doubt the squatter problem was increased during the Japanese Occupation but the main encouragement was given to squatters who wished to cultivate land in order to provide food. It was not a policy during the Occupation to encourage persons to squat merely for the purpose of providing accommodation. Although there was lack of control, bad squatter kampongs existed in some form or other before the Japanese Occupation.⁶⁶

Negotiating Family and Workplace

How did the urban Chinese respond to the housing squeeze? Maurice Freedman's anthropological work in Singapore in 1949-1950 sheds light on the different dynamics operating in urban and rural Chinese families. Analysing the original schedules of the 1947 Municipal survey, Freedman found that the urban households were usually nuclear families. This was because the parents lived with one of their married children, typically the eldest son, enabling the other children to establish nuclear families. In contrast, Freedman's own survey of 74 rural households in Jurong found that the average household size was 7.3 and 35 households were of the extended family type.⁶⁷ This suggests that the urban family was more predisposed than its rural counterpart towards leaving the Central Area in fragments.

⁶⁶ HB 1060/53, Memo from Acting Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, to Manager, SIT, 30 Oct 1953.

⁶⁷ Freedman, *Chinese Family and Marriage in Singapore*, pp. 28, 34, 38-39.

In the 1950s, the congested Central Area was accommodating smaller households than elsewhere in the country. In his 1956 study of 632 Chinese households in Upper Nankin Street, a street of shophouse dwellers in the Central Area earmarked for clearance, Barrington Kaye found that the average household size was 3.0 overall and 4.5 for nuclear families. These figures are lower than the country-wide Chinese averages of 5.1 and 5.41 respectively in the 1957 census. Children under 10 made up 25% of Kaye's survey population, compared to 33% in the 1957 census.⁶⁸ Moreover, in You Poh Seng's 1955 housing survey of the Central Area, 91% of the households had not applied for permanent housing built by the SIT, with 63% citing the high cost of rent as the main reason. When asked where they would go if they had to move out, 73% preferred to be near their present residence and workplace, 13% in the Kampong Tiong Bahru area just west of the Central Area, and the remainder to urban areas in the east, like Geylang and Jalan Besar.⁶⁹ While You's informants might be interpreted as resistant to rehousing, they in fact possessed a degree of recognition of the need to move and where to move to in such an eventuality.

If to leave the Central Area was an accepted conclusion, to where and what type of housing should the Chinese family move? One option was the permanent housing built by the SIT. Its policy was to 'provide the lower and lower middle income groups with houses of sound construction and good design and amenities such as open spaces, shops and playgrounds'.⁷⁰ Most of the SIT's estates were situated just outside the Central Area, such as Balestier, Farrer Park and St. Michael's to the north; Tiong Bahru, Kampong Silat, Bukit Merah, Delta, Henderson, Alexandra, Brickworks, and Queenstown to the west; and Lavender Street, Jalan Besar, Lorong Tiga, Kallang Airport, Upper Aljunied Road, Kolam Ayer, and Guillemard Road to the east. In most cases, these estates were close to the urban kampongs – Tiong Bahru Estate, for example, was only half a mile from 'Big Town', and nearer to the Central Area than the massive kampongs on its western flank – so the choice between a permanent flat and a wooden dwelling was not based on distance.

⁶⁸ Kaye, *Upper Nankin Street*, pp. 28, 32.

⁶⁹ You Poh Seng, 'The Housing Survey of Singapore, 1955', *Malayan Economic Review*, 2 (1), 1957, pp. 73-74.

⁷⁰ SIT, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 3.

What deterred the Chinese residents was that SIT housing was high-rental and frequently unsuitable for the needs of extended or semi-extended families. Between 1947 and 1959, the Trust built a total of 20,907 units or an average of 1,742 units per year. This was far below the 1955 Master Plan's estimation of a figure of 10,000 units per year over twenty years to meet the housing shortage. In fact, this figure was adjusted upwards at the end of the 1950s to 15,000 units in accordance with the high rate of population increase.⁷¹ SIT housing was in such short supply that it encouraged the popular practice of paying a large sum of 'tea money' to obtain a Trust flat, allegedly between \$200 to \$1,000.⁷²

In contrast, Goh Keng Swee's 1956 study of low-income households found that a fifth of the households (but a fourth of the population) lived in a state of poverty, with an income under the amount of \$102 required to meet the minimum monthly standards of living.⁷³ The SIT sought to peg rentals for its houses at one-fifth of family income: between up to \$35 and \$55 for household incomes of \$400 and below, and between \$56 and \$75 and above for incomes above \$400.⁷⁴ These rates were much higher than the subsidised rentals of the Housing and Development Board, the post-colonial housing authority, for its 1-, 2- and 3-room flats: \$20, \$40 and \$60 respectively.⁷⁵ In 1959, there were just 13,324 families on the Trust's housing register, a figure which was both large and small; it signified the low numbers of flats built by the SIT but also the massive number of families *not* listed on the register, who obviously felt that what was constructed did not fulfill their housing needs.

In some cases, the SIT housing was simply unsuitable for Chinese urban families. In 1957, the redevelopment of the Central Area resulted in the clearance of 290 families residing in flats at Selegie Road, in Stamford district in the town area. More than 85% of the families belonged to the low-income group earning under

⁷¹ HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 8; Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey*, p. 25.

⁷² *MT*, 31 Dec 1949.

⁷³ Goh Keng Swee, *Urban Incomes and Housing: A Report on the Social Survey of Singapore, 1953-54* (Singapore: Department of Social Welfare, 1956), p. 131. Goh surveyed households earning less than \$400 a month.

⁷⁴ SIT, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 45.

⁷⁵ HDB, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 3.

\$400 a month.⁷⁶ All the families desired to remain in the City area and were initially willing to accept new premises to be built nearby at Albert Street, with only two families expressing mild interest in moving to Queenstown New Town.⁷⁷ The Trust decided to allocate one two-room flat (a living room and one bedroom) for families between 3-10 persons and two such flats for families of more than 10 persons.⁷⁸ The rehousing, according to the SIT, proceeded smoothly, with nearly all the families affected by Phase I of the scheme moving into the Albert Street housing.⁷⁹ But J. M. Jumabhoy, the Assemblyman for Stamford, received numerous complaints about overcrowding. The Trust, he revealed, had failed to take into account how 'there might be more than one married couple in a family of 10', or that 'there may be other adults in the family, so that a one-bedroom flat would not be sufficient'.⁸⁰

Eventually, the Trust acknowledged that 'some hardship' had occurred for the larger families.⁸¹ When offered a 3-room maisonette, Leong Chew Chang asked for an additional 2-room flat nearby, because 'all my sons are now adult, and in the near future they will be getting married'.⁸² Ow Kim Yeow, however, rejected the 3-room housing, explaining that 'my two sons are having their own family and with many children, there will be great inconvenience and dispute if they stay together'.⁸³ Lim Leong Soon, the head of a household with three married family groups, totalling 18 persons, had been staying in two flats with three bedrooms and a living room. On the maisonette, Lim felt that '[t]he rooms are too small and can hardly solve the problem of overcrowding in my household'. He decided that, if no larger accommodation was available, 'I am prepared to put up with my difficulties as best as I could'.⁸⁴ Most of the rehoused families settled in the vicinity, but those who did not find the SIT arrangements suitable were forced to move elsewhere.⁸⁵

⁷⁶ HB 535/51, Memo from Estates Officer (Admin), SIT, to Acting Estates Manager, SIT, 15 Aug 1955.

⁷⁷ HB 535/1/51, Memo from Estates Officer (Lettings), SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 6 Jun 1956.

⁷⁸ HB 535/1/51, Memo from Estates Officer (Lettings), SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 25 Nov 1957.

⁷⁹ HB 535/51, Letter from Chairman, SIT, to Minister for Commerce and Industry, 5 Oct 1957.

⁸⁰ HB 535/51, Letter from Minister for Commerce and Industry to Chairman, SIT, 27 Sep 1957.

⁸¹ HB 535/1/51, Memo from Estates Officer (Lettings), SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 25 Oct 1957.

⁸² HB 535/1/51, Letter from Leong Chew Chang to Estates Manager, SIT, 5 Dec 1957.

⁸³ HB 535/1/51, Letter from Ow Kim Yeow to Estates Manager, SIT, 3 Dec 1957.

⁸⁴ HB 535/1/51, Letter from Lim Leong Soon to Assistant Minister for Local Government, Land and Housing, 26 Sep 1957; HB 535/1/51, Letter from Lim Leong Soon to Chairman, SIT, 14 Nov 1957; HB 535/1/51, Letter from Lim Leong Soon to Estates Manager, SIT, 5 Dec 1957.

⁸⁵ SIT, *Annual Report 1957*, p. 21.

Goh Keng Swee's 1956 survey revealed where most Chinese families chose to move to under such circumstances. Of the 2,364 households residing in shophouses, the average size was 3.1 persons, compared to 4.8 in the 1,108 households in wooden dwellings. Only 3% of the shophouse households had an exclusive use of the dwelling, with 31% sharing with 10 or more households!⁸⁶ Goh discovered that 93% of the households living in wooden dwellings were located in the three outer city wards situated on the urban periphery. In Ward IV in the eastern part of the City, he reported 'a very dense attap settlement north of Geylang Road up to the Kallang Pudding, a swampy area. In fact there is a considerable attap settlement over this swamp between Lorong 1 and Lorong 17'. In the northeast of Ward V, situated north of the Central Area, there was 'a large vegetable farming area between Upper Serangoon Road and Braddell Road to the east of Balestier Road'. In Ward VI at the western end of the Singapore River, Goh discovered 'a large number of attap settlements in the southern section of this ward between Havelock Road and Teluk Blangah Road. The largest of these are found in the Tiong Bahru area, where more than 20,000 families are counted in the Diagnostic Survey Team attap census'.⁸⁷

Marriage was a frequent cause of the local migration and so many moving families were young ones. Yap Kuai Yong, born in 1927 in the Central Area, grew up in Upper Nankin Street and Nankin Street, south of the Singapore River. When she married, she shifted to For Seng ('Fire City'), a large kampong with a mixed population near the City Gas Works, north of the Rochor River, just outside the eastern limit of the town. Yap explained her decision, 'When we got married, we didn't manage to apply for a house. If we rented a house, it was illegal. [Laughs] My first son then was two years old, the second one was a few months old'.⁸⁸ Lim Soo Hiang's grandmother and father had arrived in Singapore from China in the 1930s. The Japanese attack on Malaya created a fear of reprisal from the invaders among the Chinese and precipitated a rush to marry off single females; the young man consequently took a wife and, with his mother, left their residence in the Central

⁸⁶ However the latter includes single-person households. Goh, *Urban Incomes and Housing*, pp. 63-66.

⁸⁷ Goh, *Urban Incomes and Housing*, pp. 14-15, 66. The Diagnostic Survey Team referred to was surveying the kampongs in 1952-1954 as part of the work of the Singapore Master Plan.

⁸⁸ Author's interview with Yap Kuai Yong, 16 Jun 2007. The term 'Fire City' was used by locals to refer to the City Gas Works.

Area to 10 Beo Lane in Bukit Ho Swee. Lim was born in 1953 to this union, as were two elder brothers, two younger brothers and two elder sisters.⁸⁹

The exodus of Chinese nuclear families from the Central Area into the urban margin is customarily likened to an ‘overspill’, implying an involuntary relocation compelled by demographic circumstances.⁹⁰ However, Leo van Grunsven has perceptively termed the urban kampongs ‘autonomous settlements’. While many migrating families had admittedly been ‘pushed out’ of the Central Area, there was a genuine opportunism and dynamism in how they settled on hilly or swampy areas, unused burial grounds or areas adjacent to incinerators or sewage works at the margins of the City. In doing so, they had pragmatically negotiated a solution to the old demand for low-rental housing near their workplace and the new challenge of raising a growing family. West of the Central Area, a large urban kampong population resided on formerly unused hilly land; the location was close to the inner city’s harbour-docks and middle- and upper class residential areas, and the British military base at Ayer Rajah, which were both sources of employment for the residents. Similarly, the dense kampong concentration living in wooden houses built over swamps in the developed Kallang-Geylang area to the east largely obtained work from the manufacturing industries located in the Kallang Basin, such as sawmills, boat building and repair, tanneries, and factories producing sago, cane, charcoal, furniture, and rubber.⁹¹ Urban kampong dwellers, like the state and private developers, were drawn to the same places at the urban periphery but had usually arrived first and settled on the land while the government spent months deliberating on acquisition.⁹²

Proximity to workplace, though, was not of equal importance to all urban kampong dwellers. As an economic group, they were heterogeneous and comprised three subgroups: full-time farmers engaged in agricultural activities, semi-urban

⁸⁹ Author’s interview with Lim Soo Hiang, 2 Jan 2008.

⁹⁰ Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee*, p. 2.

⁹¹ Van Grunsven, *Patterns of Housing and Intra-urban Migration Part 1*, p. 60; Lee Kip Lin, ‘A History of Kampong Bugis’, in Tay Kheng Soon et. al (eds), *Kampong Bugis Design Guide Plan*, unpublished manuscript, 1990, p. 88.

⁹² SIT, *Annual Report 1957*, p. 29.

dwellers and urban dwellers.⁹³ As Table 1.4 shows, full-time farmers, dependent for their livelihood on the produce of the land, typically lived in kampongs further away (three to four miles) from the Central Area, such as in Toa Payoh and MacPherson Road (Ward V in Goh Keng Swee's study), and to the west in Kampong Henderson and Queenstown. But while their main income might be derived from market gardening, one or more members of the family could be working in the Central Area.⁹⁴ The urban dweller, on the other hand, was 'the City worker and his family who occupy cubicles in multi-family dwellings erected on vacant land in the suburbs close to the City', in places such as Tiong Bahru and Bukit Ho Swee (see Table 1.4).⁹⁵ This group was residing in the urban kampongs due to the housing shortage,⁹⁶ and in economic terms, was 'tied to the town and [if rehoused] proper accommodation has to be provided within approximately five miles of the town centre'.⁹⁷ Wedged in between were the semi-urban dwellers, who derived their income from both urban employment and growing vegetables or rearing poultry or pigs, or obtaining such produce at lower cost from a neighbour. These families were relatively well-established in the kampongs, as '[m]any of these families live close to the City but when they first moved on to the land they were in rural surroundings'.⁹⁸

The urban kampongs, consequently, had mixed populations. In Toa Payoh, for instance, there were 21,000 people living in wooden houses in 1955. This included farmers, residents who kept pigs or poultry but had little land, and other attap dwellers with no farming interests at all.⁹⁹ Kampong Henderson also had an economically heterogeneous population of vegetable gardeners, pig farmers and workers in the five *bee hoon*-making factories in the locality. The latter was a vital part of the local economy, with the workers given land nearby to erect their houses,

⁹³ Singapore, *Report of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party* (Singapore: Printed at the Government Printing Office, 1956), p. 5.

⁹⁴ HB 722/55, Memo titled 'The Squatter Problem', undated, c. 1955.

⁹⁵ SIT, *Annual Report 1954*, p. 14.

⁹⁶ HB 722/55, Memo titled 'The Squatter Problem', undated, c. 1955.

⁹⁷ HB 722/55, Notes of First Meeting of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party, 15 Sep 1955.

⁹⁸ HB 722/55, Notes for Consideration of the 'Squatter Problem' Working Party, undated, c. 1955; HB 722/55, Memo titled 'The Squatter Problem', undated, c. 1955.

⁹⁹ HB 722/55, Draft Report of the Working Party on Toa Payoh, undated, c. 1955.

Table 1.4: Population and Economic Characteristics of Urban Kampong Dwellers

Urban Kampong	No. of Families	Estimated No. of Families Engaged in Farming
Queenstown	210	210
Kampong Henderson	122	122
MacPherson Road	377	300
Toa Payoh	780	200
Kampong Silat/Tiong Bahru	3,750	-
Kampong Bugis	320	-
Kampong Soopoo	280	-
Henderson Road	400	-
Bukit Ho Swee	1,670	-

Adapted from Singapore, *Report of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party* (1956), pp. 14-15.

rear poultry and pigs and plant vegetables to augment their wages. Conversely the pig farmers did irregular work in the Central Area as labourers, lorry drivers and artisans to supplement their incomes.¹⁰⁰ Covent Garden, seated astride the western end of the Singapore River, was known to the Chinese as Hong Lim Pa Sat.¹⁰¹ It had a mixed population of urban and semi-urban dwellers, while the numerous godowns and warehouses in the kampong indicated how the livelihood of its inhabitants was chiefly tied to the entrepot trade. Joyce Soh, born there in 1947, belonged to a large extended family headed by her grandfather and his seven sons. He was well-known to his neighbours as a builder of *twakows* and *tongkangs*, the crafts plying the river transferring goods from larger ships to the numerous warehouses on the quays along the riverfront.¹⁰² My mother, Loh Siew Har (born 1952) lived nearby in a wooden house on the banks of the Singapore River off Kim Seng Road with her mother and four brothers. Her father also worked on the *twakows*.¹⁰³

Despite the expansion of industry and building construction in postwar Singapore, the colony remained in the firm grip of the entrepot trade economy. This formal economy was supported by a large ‘shadow economy’, a service sector which had developed as a means of absorbing surplus labour produced by rapid population

¹⁰⁰ Horsley, *Resettlement of a Community*, pp. 78-79, 95.

¹⁰¹ ‘Hong Lim Market’, named after Cheang Hong Lim, a prominent Chinese merchant in the nineteenth century and the builder of the market in the area.

¹⁰² Author’s interview with Joyce Soh, 5 Apr 2007.

¹⁰³ Author’s interview with Loh Siew Har, 2 Feb 2006.

increase. The 1957 census states that more than two-thirds of the economically-active population were employed in three sectors connected directly or indirectly to the entrepot trade: 'commerce' (26%), 'transport, storage and communications' (11%), and 'services' (34%). Only 14% of the labour force was in manufacturing, while the postwar expansion of building and construction had raised the percentage of workers in that industry to 5%. Two-thirds of the employment were in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations, such as 'craftsmen, production process workers and labourers' (31.4%), 'sales workers' (18.3%) and 'service, sport, entertainment, and recreation workers' (17%). The Chinese population was over-represented in the first two categories and in 'agricultural workers' and 'fishermen'. The typical urban or semi-urban kampong dweller was likely to work in low- and middle-income jobs which accounted for more than half of all occupations, such as clerical workers (comprising 11.9% of economically-active persons in the 1957 census); unskilled or general labourers (nearly 10%); workers in domestic service, hospitals, hotels, clubs, and restaurants (10%); hawkers, street vendors and stallholders (7.9%); rail, road and ship transport workers (7.5%); agricultural smallholders and market gardeners (5.2%).¹⁰⁴ Except for the last, these occupations were typically located in the City and would have tied the worker to it and the workplace.

However, it should be noted that the employment of urban and semi-urban dwellers was complex and ought to be construed in terms of shades of economic activity. There was much under-employment or part-time and irregular employment, giving rise to a large pool of the so-called 'self-employed'. This included hawkers and stallholders (frequently itinerant and unlicensed), trishaw riders and taxi drivers (which included drivers of 'pirate' or unlicensed taxis):¹⁰⁵

[The] hawkers of food and other things [who] with the small traders and trishaw riders and others form a numerous group of 'self-employed'....many who seek a livelihood in such occupations can

¹⁰⁴ Chua, *Report on the Census of Population 1957*, pp. 82, 85, 88.

¹⁰⁵ Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey*, p. 21; G. J. Brocklehurst, *Report to the Government of Singapore on Social Security Measures* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1957), p. 47.

hardly be regarded as fully employed in them, while they equally cannot well be regarded as unemployed.¹⁰⁶

The number of hawkers was acknowledged to be ‘unascertainable’ since it included both professional hawkers and unemployed people who had temporarily taken up the occupation.¹⁰⁷ In addition, there was a large pool of ‘casual labour’, such as dock workers and building and construction labourers, who were ‘paid daily’ and moved ‘at frequent intervals from one job, and one employer, to another’.¹⁰⁸ Such flexibility and mobility of work was characteristic of the low-income group in an entrepot economy, unfettered by the social discipline of factory wage work. In a kampong along Rochor Canal at the eastern fringe of the City, the breadwinners were mostly workers in the service or manufacturing industries or hawkers, living on irregular incomes and residing within three miles of their workplace.¹⁰⁹ The nature of work suggests a greater ability and willingness among low-income Chinese to move places, proof of which was the existence of the group of ‘semi-urban’ kampong dwellers. A 1957 social report stated that while a quarter of the population were residing in the rural areas, many were employed in the urban area.¹¹⁰

Direct Arrivals

What is also often not realised was how many migrants from Malaya, China and other countries were arriving *directly* in the urban kampongs after the war. The act of bypassing the traditional reception zone in the Central Area suggests that Chinese families were looking at home and workplace in a radically altered way. The Land Office reported in 1948 that ‘every departmental request for a site on Crown Land involved the disturbance of aliens many of whom drifted into Singapore during or immediately before the occupation’.¹¹¹ The Social Welfare Department, in appraising the proliferation of unauthorised wooden housing,

¹⁰⁶ Singapore, *Report of the Committee on Minimum Standards of Livelihood* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1957), p. 3;

¹⁰⁷ Brocklehurst, *Report to the Government of Singapore on Social Security Measures*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁸ Singapore, *Report of the Committee on Minimum Standards of Livelihood*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁹ Chua Chap Jee, Case-study of an Urban Slum in Singapore, unpublished academic exercise, Department of Geography, University of Singapore, 1966, pp. 22-23a.

¹¹⁰ Brocklehurst, *Report to the Government of Singapore on Social Security Measures*, p. 9.

¹¹¹ Commissioner of Lands, *Annual Report 1948*, p. 7.

concurred that ‘there had been a steady influx of population into Singapore from neighbouring countries’.¹¹² A substantial stream of this movement into the urban kampongs from outside Singapore, particularly immediately after the war, was of an emergency nature:

There has been a considerable influx of population caused through the political chaos in the Netherlands East Indies. The reoccupying military forces have claimed priority for whatever accommodation they require and it has been a problem of real difficulty to find alternative billets so as to set free such buildings which are required for rehabilitation purposes....

The housing situation in Singapore is also greatly aggravated by the fact that many people from the rural areas have found it necessary to come to Singapore to live in order to be near the very meagre supplies of food and clothing which have been available in the last few years. The result of this is that much land in the Municipal area which was vacant before the War, has now been occupied by unauthorised squatters....The number of squatters in unauthorised occupation of land must run into many thousands.¹¹³

In addition, there had been a ‘considerable influx of population from the [Malayan] mainland during the recent state of emergency’ into wooden dwellings.¹¹⁴

Besides the ‘push’ supplied by political crises in Malaya, China and the Netherlands East Indies, many migrants seeking family or work also arrived directly in the urban kampongs. Leo van Grunsven argues that a large proportion were married women with children joining their husbands in Singapore.¹¹⁵ In 1978, he surveyed 229 Chinese migrant households in Kampong Potong Pasir, northeast of the Central Area. He found the largest proportion, 37%, to have arrived in Singapore

¹¹² SWD, *Annual Report 1952*, p. 7.

¹¹³ HB 423/46, Comments on Questionnaire Adopted by the Subcommission of the Economic Reconstruction of Devastated Areas, 24 Oct 1946.

¹¹⁴ SIT, *Annual Report 1954*, p. 14.

¹¹⁵ Van Grunsven, *Patterns of Housing and Intra-urban Migration Part 1*, pp. 97-98.

between 1950 and 1959, compared to 19% prior to 1950 and 22% between 1960 and 1969.¹¹⁶ Van Grunsven also discovered that, of the Chinese migrant household heads, 23% had come from the Central Area, 38% from urban areas outside it, 4% from the rural area, and 34% from outside Singapore. Of the 83 migrant household heads who had arrived in Potong Pasir in 1950-1959, 39% had come from the Central Area, 33% from urban areas outside it, 2% from the rural area, and 27% from outside Singapore. These findings support three key conclusions: a substantial outflow from the Central Area; heavy movement between urban kampongs; and a large proportion of direct arrivals in Potong Pasir who bypassed the Central Area.¹¹⁷

In 1954, the first full working year of the Immigration Ordinance, more than 3,000 Chinese wives and children arrived from China. This prompted fears that, while this inflow 'is no doubt desirable from eugenic and other points of view, their arrival aggravates the Colony's serious problems of overcrowding and strains still further the social services being provided'.¹¹⁸ The parents of Tay Yan Woon (born 1943) had married and had children in China, before first Tay's father and then his wife left for Singapore. They arrived in Si Kah Teng (Kampong Tiong Bahru), just south of Bukit Ho Swee:

My parents were from China. My mother came to Singapore when she was still very young, around 20 odd years old at that time. Two of my elder brothers, one younger brother and me, the four of us were born in Singapore. Another two of my elder brothers and one sister remained in China. My mother joined my father in Singapore, who lived in Si Kah Teng at that time, and we were born there. But not long after, when I was 4 or 5 at the most, Si Kah Teng was burned. Then we moved to Bukit Ho Swee, rented an attap house, where we reared some livestock.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Leo van Grunsven, *Patterns of Housing and Intra-urban Migration: Part 2: A Case Study of Kampong Potong Pasir* (Utrecht: Geografisch Instituut, Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, 1983), p. 35.

¹¹⁷ Van Grunsven, *Patterns of Housing and Intra-urban Migration Part 2*, p. 95.

¹¹⁸ Singapore, 'Population', *Annual Report 1954*, p. 15.

¹¹⁹ Author's interview with Tay Yan Woon, 28 Sep 2006.

Unlike Tay, Beh Swee Kim's family came from Malaya but for similar reasons. In 1954, when she was 12, Beh, with her parents, six younger brothers and two younger sisters, moved from their hometown, Taiping, in the state of Perak, Malaya, to Singapore. They stayed in a shophouse at Alexandra, west of the Central Area, before she married and moved to an attap house in Bukit Ho Swee. Her father, who had worked as a teacher and a clerk in Taiping, did not want to remain in Malaya and came instead to Singapore to make a living.¹²⁰ Likewise, for Sim Kim Boey, born in the 1930s in a kampong in Batu Pahat in the state of Johor, marriage led to her settling down in Bukit Ho Swee:

My husband is a Singaporean and I married him here. It was arranged and I didn't know him previously. His family knew my father so they arranged it. He was a manual worker, that was common in those days.¹²¹

Wong Pok Hee's family, too, arrived from Johor and rented a cheap attap house in Bukit Ho Swee for ten dollars. Wong (born 1941) explained that family tragedy, rather than the war, was instrumental in their relocation:

I was born in Pontian, a small town in Johor. We were still in Johor when the Japanese invaded Malaya. We communicated with them, we borrowed some pens from them. [Laughs] They did not disturb us. I came to Singapore when I was six. My father had already passed away then. Previously he was a sawmill worker and built houses, then he felt sick one day and passed away. The rest of our family came to Singapore because we had nothing for making a livelihood in Johor. At that time, there was no need for passports. I had an elder brother and four siblings, three elder sisters, seven of us including our mother. I was the fifth child, the youngest. I had a younger brother who was given to our relative in Malaysia and didn't come over.¹²²

¹²⁰ Author's interview with Beh Swee Kim, 22 Jan 2007.

¹²¹ Author's interview with Sim Kim Boey, 14 Feb 2007.

¹²² Author's interview with Wong Pok Hee, 19 Apr 2007.

In 1947, the urban kampong population was estimated at 127,000. Between 1936 and 1947, it had increased from 26,000 to 56,000 in the Outram and Kampong Bahru areas in Mukim I west of the Central Area; and from 28,000 to 50,000 in Braddell, Toa Payoh and Bukit Timah in Mukim XVII to the north. In the east, the urban kampong population had risen from 24,000 to 37,000 in Kallang and Paya Lebar in Mukim XXIV; from 2,500 to 10,000 in Geylang Serai (part of Mukim XXIII); and from 25,000 to 38,000 in Siglap in Mukim XXVI. These changes marked an overall population increase of 60%. The health authorities reported that there were seventeen kampongs in Mukim I and about thirty others in other areas, all of which were 'being added to daily'.¹²³

Driven by reasons of emergency and family reunion, the urban kampong population swelled in the 1950s. In 1952, unauthorised wooden constructions were reportedly increasing at the rate of thirty a month.¹²⁴ By 1959, most of an estimated 10,000 wooden houses in Singapore were located at the fringes of the City.¹²⁵ In 1953, the SIT's survey of wooden dwellings in the City found the population risen to 185,000, an increase of 46%.¹²⁶ Both the 1955 Master Plan and the 1956 Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party estimated some 41,000 families, or 246,000 persons, resided in wooden dwellings in the urban area.¹²⁷ The Master Plan report similarly warned that the proliferation of the 'attap' areas had become a major social concern.¹²⁸ Massive fires in Kampong Koo Chye in 1958, Kampong Tiong Bahru in 1959 and Kampong Bukit Ho Swee in 1961 rendered, respectively, 2,050, 5,220 and 15,694 persons homeless. Despite the fires, and substantial clearance and resettlement in other kampongs, the number of urban kampong dwellers remained at 200,000-250,000 in 1961, an increase of 58-97% over the 1947 figure. These numbers are estimates but the growth rate of the urban kampong population was evidently much higher than that taking place in the Central Area.

¹²³ SIT 808/50, Memo by W. E. Hutchinson (Deputy Municipal Health Officer), 31 Aug 1948.

¹²⁴ CC, *Administration Report 1952*, p. 20.

¹²⁵ HB 477/53, Report titled 'Considerations in Respect of Low-Cost Housing and Unauthorised Housing', 7 Jan 1959.

¹²⁶ SIT, *Annual Report 1953*, p. 38.

¹²⁷ *Master Plan: Report of Survey*, p. 26; Singapore, *Report of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party*, p. 13.

¹²⁸ Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey*, p. 9.

The exodus into the urban kampongs was accelerated by the involuntary relocation of people due to private and public development projects. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, the state played a key role here, since its postwar development programme for more schools, hospitals, houses, and roads were forcing the eviction of numerous families living in wooden houses.¹²⁹ Conversely, the acceptance of certain urban kampongs as ‘tolerated attap areas’ under the 1955 Master Plan, also discussed in Chapter 3, encouraged a spurt in the construction of unauthorised wooden dwellings in these settlements.¹³⁰ Chapter 5, in addition, examines how the victims of the great urban kampong fires in the 1950s constituted another movement, either to another kampong or even back to the fire site to erect new temporary dwellings. Most families dishoused by eviction or fire refused the offer of SIT accommodation because they found the new location inconvenient for work or the rents too high. They commonly settled instead into dense urban kampongs which were not easily cleared.¹³¹ By not building affordable permanent housing for those evicted, the government’s very ‘success’ in demolishing one area of unauthorised housing contributed directly to the in-filling of the remaining urban kampongs.¹³²

Mobile Families and ‘Unscrupulous Racketeers’

In contrast, private builders of unauthorised wooden housing, some registered, others illegal, responded vigorously to the growing demand for cheap housing within City limits. The urban kampong dwellers did not usually build their housing themselves. Ostensibly, ‘[t]he squatter is not an experienced house builder, he wastes materials, makes constructional mistakes, or engages second rate “skilled labour”’.¹³³ Consequently it was considered that ‘[s]elf-help housing is impracticable in Singapore’ as the dwellers usually engaged a building contractor.¹³⁴ In December 1958, Lim Koon Teck, the Progressive Party Assemblyman for Paya

¹²⁹ Singapore, *Report of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party*, p. 3.

¹³⁰ HB 477/53, Notes of a Discussion on the Improvement of Kampongs, 7 Mar 1957.

¹³¹ SIT, *Annual Report 1950*, p. 21.

¹³² SIT, *Annual Report 1955*, pp. 32-33.

¹³³ HB 722/55, Memo titled ‘The Squatter Problem’, undated, c. 1955.

¹³⁴ HB 722/55, Notes of First Meeting of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party, 15 Sep 1955.

Lebar, informed the Assembly that these builders were constructing houses on leased or vacant lands without submitting plans to the City Council for approval and making a profit of \$2,000 per dwelling. The rackets were 'spreading like wildfire' and building hundreds of houses every week. As Lim pointed out, many people were purchasing 'flimsy houses which require constant repair, without light or water, and sometimes no drainings, and...liable to be pulled down over their ears', and in addition still had to pay rent to the landowner.¹³⁵

In particular, the People's Action Party¹³⁶ strongly represented the builders as illegal and unscrupulous 'racketeers'. In December 1957, the party, still in opposition in the Legislative Assembly as a socialist, anti-colonial party, won the most number of seats (13 out of 32) in the 1957 City Council elections.¹³⁷ The new Mayor of the City, Ong Eng Guan, a rising star in the party, announced a 'new kampong policy' and pledged to 'reverse the old policy of neglecting our people who live in the kampong'.¹³⁸ Simultaneously accusing the colonial bureaucracy of corruption, Ong charged that 'unscrupulous builders, in liaison with officials of our Building and Surveyors' Department, have built many unauthorised structures and sold them to innocent victims at huge profits, who later found out that their houses are unauthorised'.¹³⁹ He urged the need to 'ruthlessly suppress the profiteering and

¹³⁵ *SLAD*, 18 Dec 1958, pp. 1556-62.

¹³⁶ The PAP was formed in November 1954 through an alliance of two political factions. The left-of-centre group was led by mostly English- and overseas-educated individuals like Lee Kuan Yew, Toh Chin Chye, Goh Keng Swee, S. Rajaratnam, and K. M. Byrne, who were influenced by ideas of Fabian socialism circulating in Britain in the early postwar years. The radical leftwing group comprised some English- but mainly Chinese-educated individuals like Lim Chin Siong, Fong Swee Suan, Chan Chiaw Thor, James Puthuchear, Samad Ismail, and Devan Nair, who were far more anti-British than the first group and subscribed to ideas of revolutionary socialism and Marxism. Toh Chin Chye was the Chairman of the PAP's first Central Executive Committee and Lee Kuan Yew the Secretary-General. The party demanded immediate independence from British colonial rule and sought the establishment of a socialist, democratic Malaya including Singapore. It quickly gained prominence in political circles as the most progressive anti-colonial party in Singapore. Through the efforts of the leftwing group, the PAP was able to mobilise the Chinese-speaking population which other parties had found difficult to engage, namely, low-income workers, Chinese school students, and wooden house dwellers. The party viewed the 1953 British Rendel Constitution as an instrument for prolonging colonial rule and contested the 1955 elections with the aim of becoming the opposition in the Legislative Assembly to challenge the constitution. It fielded four candidates, three of whom were elected, namely, Lee Kuan Yew, Lim Chin Siong and Goh Chew Chua. The PAP's mobilisation of farmers and wooden house dwellers in the 1950s is dealt with in Chapter 3.

¹³⁷ Further discussion of the Council's work with respect to wooden housing is covered in Chapter 3. The PAP controlled the Council after the 1957 elections through a coalition with the 2 United Malays National Organisation Councillors.

¹³⁸ Speech by Ong Eng Guan, 6 Jan 1958, in CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1958*; CC, *Administration Report 1958*, pp. 1-2. Ong was also the Treasurer of the PAP at the time.

¹³⁹ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1958*, 31 Jan 1958, p. 47.

exploitation of innocent people by building contractors of unauthorised huts'.¹⁴⁰ After the PAP came to power in the May 1959 elections, the HDB, formed in February 1960 to spearhead its housing programme, resolved that '[d]rastic action has to be taken to crack down on racketeers and to nip nefarious activities in the bud'.¹⁴¹ The Board maintained that the problem was a social one, deeply embedded in the kampongs, since the 'racketeers' were frequently the chief-tenants of the wooden dwellings and were 'generally persons with secret society connections'.¹⁴²

The PAP's binary social representations of 'unscrupulous racketeers' and 'gullible people' fueled its drive to eradicate unauthorised dwellings and build public housing. Nevertheless, to urban kampong dwellers, concerns with 'legality' and 'scruples' ranked low against the basic need for affordable, suitable housing. What mattered to them were the ease of building wooden housing – an attap house could literally be constructed overnight – or, more often, of finding one to rent. Lee Ah Gar was part of a family of five staying in a wooden house at 12-E Beo Lane immediately after the war, at the western tip of the Singapore River. His father, a hawker selling *rojak*, was not doing well. A visit to Geylang Serai kampong, at the eastern part of the City, offered an opportunity to improve their livelihood. The decision to uproot to the other side of the City was made as easily as the rapid construction of a wooden house at the new site:

My father had a friend who lived in Geylang Serai, so he and my mother went there to take a look, and found that the crowd there was much bigger! So wouldn't it be better if we sold *rojak* there? So my father went there and found a spot, a piece of land, with his friend, and he built a house on that spot. I tell you, last time it was all attap houses. We went to the construction company to buy all the materials, the wooden boards and such, then got the construction company to get it done for us. There was no registration.

¹⁴⁰ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings* 1958, 28 Nov 1958, p. 7.

¹⁴¹ HDB, *Annual Report* 1960, p. 5.

¹⁴² HB 408/52, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Deputy Prime Minister, 8 Jul 1960.

Finding a wooden house for rent, as Lee explained, required no official assistance and depended simply on

recommendation from neighbours and friends. Say, if I know you, I'll ask if you have houses for rent at your side. You could also go out to look yourself. Unlike now, when you have to knock on doors, the attap houses then were open. You just go door to door asking, "Auntie or uncle, do you have a room for rent?"¹⁴³

Lily Wee, who grew up in a family of eight, moved between contiguous kampongs in Bukit Ho Swee, Tiong Bahru and Henderson west of the Singapore River after the war. Mutual help was important in finding a wooden dwelling to rent:

You needed a house, you just looked around. It was very easy to find. Especially, there was no television, right? By word of mouth. You said you are looking for a house. Then somebody would say, there is a house down there, and then you went to see. Last time, there was no agent. Actually there were but if you had relatives living here and living there, you would tell somebody and somebody would tell you, down there, the house is empty. You could get things done very quickly in a kampong, it was very easy if you needed help.¹⁴⁴

'Continuous moving' was a common frame of experience for many urban kampong dwellers in the Bukit Ho Swee locality. Tan Geok Hak was born in 1929 in an attap house in Zion Road at the western tip of the Singapore River. Her family moved repeatedly to rental housing nearby, mostly wooden, occasionally a shophouse: at Covent Garden, Indus Road, Ganges Avenue, and finally, Bukit Ho Swee. Tan's relocation from Ganges Avenue was involuntary, as they were being evicted. But her final move to Bukit Ho Swee in 1959 was to fulfill a personal need: she had married by 1954 and had three children subsequently and so 'had to find a place for my family'. Tan added,

¹⁴³ Author's interview with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006.

¹⁴⁴ Author's interview with Lily Wee, 3 Jun 2007.

At that time, it was not possible to rent from the government, so we rented from someone. So we kept moving. It was not stable. Last time, if you want to rent a room [in public housing], it was very difficult. So we kept renting attap houses until the [1961 Bukit Ho Swee] fire. After the fire, we lived in public housing.¹⁴⁵

The challenge of finding the next suitable house was also replicated in the early life of Tan Ah Kok, born in 1932 and adopted by a couple. Her experiences of moving were governed by family events. Tan grew up in a small family of four in a rented room inside an attap house behind King's Theatre; this was in Si Kah Teng and the proximate site where the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire started. But when her adopted father passed away and the family could not afford the rent, they went to live in a kampong in Leng Kee Sua, near Alexandra, where her mother had married another man. He was a *twakow* coolie but had become a temporary market gardener during the Japanese Occupation due to the cessation of trade. After the war, when he resumed his former work, her family went back to their previous landlord in Si Kah Teng, where the rent – \$2.50 a month – was 'very cheap'. Tan stayed there until 1952, when she got married and rented an entire attap house for her family near the Great World Amusement Park nearby. Tan had found the last place through word of mouth:

People recommended it to us. Someone whom we knew in Bukit Ho Swee, their second aunt was staying at the Great World. We were looking for a place. She said the place was good, it had 2 rooms and a hall, so there was no need to share with another family. Her mother-in-law had built the house and was looking for people to rent.

Finding an attap house, for Tan, was not daunting:

People last time did not advertise in the newspapers. [Laughs] In the past, it was through recommendations. Let's say, we heard that you wanted to rent a house, and if there was one available, I will tell you

¹⁴⁵ Author's interview with Tan Geok Hak, 5 Oct 2006.

to go and rent it. If you find the house good, then it's OK. If you don't find it good, then you won't take it.¹⁴⁶

Kampong Bukit Ho Swee and other urban kampongs were consequently products of an important social transformation in postwar Singapore. The movement of low-income Chinese families into previously vacant spaces at the margins of the City had radically altered the urban landscape. Customarily depicted as historically inert or gullible, the low-income urban Chinese family was changing then, not just in its size and composition but also in its attitudes towards family life, housing and movement. Whether they had left the Central Area by force of circumstance, or arrived directly in the urban periphery due to war, emergency or family reunion, for many, albeit not all of them, the traditional reluctance to move out of range of shophouse or workplace was eroding. In its place was a growing willingness to move, even move repeatedly, to seize an opportunity or take a risk for a better life for one's family. The new mobility of the Chinese families gave rise to large settlements of unauthorised wooden dwellings like Bukit Ho Swee and destabilised established patterns of housing laid out by the British colonial planners. The accommodation in the urban kampongs was dismal, but they were arguably 'slums of hope', where their residents, with their children, were in search of a new future.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Author's interview with Tan Ah Kok, 22 Mar 2007.

¹⁴⁷ Author's interview with Ann Wee, 1 Nov 2006.

Chapter 2

‘Black Area’

Kampong Bukit Ho Swee in the 1950s, as Map 2.1 shows, lay in the growing quarter of unauthorised wooden housing at the tail end of the Singapore River, two miles from the Central Area. Covering a rectangular area of about 135 acres, under half a mile wide and a fifth of that deep, it was by no means the largest kampong in the area, being dwarfed by Si Kah Teng¹ across Tiong Bahru Road. This was one of the two main roads which bounded Bukit Ho Swee, the other being Havelock Road to the north. On the kampong’s eastern and western flanks were Outram Road and the Tiong Bahru sewerage works respectively. The Havelock and Outram roads led into the Central Area, showing the direction of the pell mell development of wooden housing. Cutting through Bukit Ho Swee were two roads, Beo Lane and Bukit Ho Swee, which met close to Tiong Bahru Road. At the kampong’s north-eastern corner ran Carey Road and Chancellor Road, short lanes terminating at the foot of the hill, on which stood a disused Cantonese cemetery named Lok Yah Teng, but which the locals called Ma Kau Thiong.² Besides Si Kah Teng, there was a substantial wooden housing development north of Havelock Road and in the *twakow*-building area, Hong Lim Pa Sat,³ and to the south, in Kampong Silat, Bukit Merah and Telok Blangah. Wooden and permanent housing struggled for space; Bukit Ho Swee was surrounded by the SIT’s Henderson, Bukit Merah, Delta-Havelock, and Tiong Bahru housing estates. These estates were fairly small except for the last, which nestled between Bukit Ho Swee and the built-up area of ‘Big Town’ to the southeast.

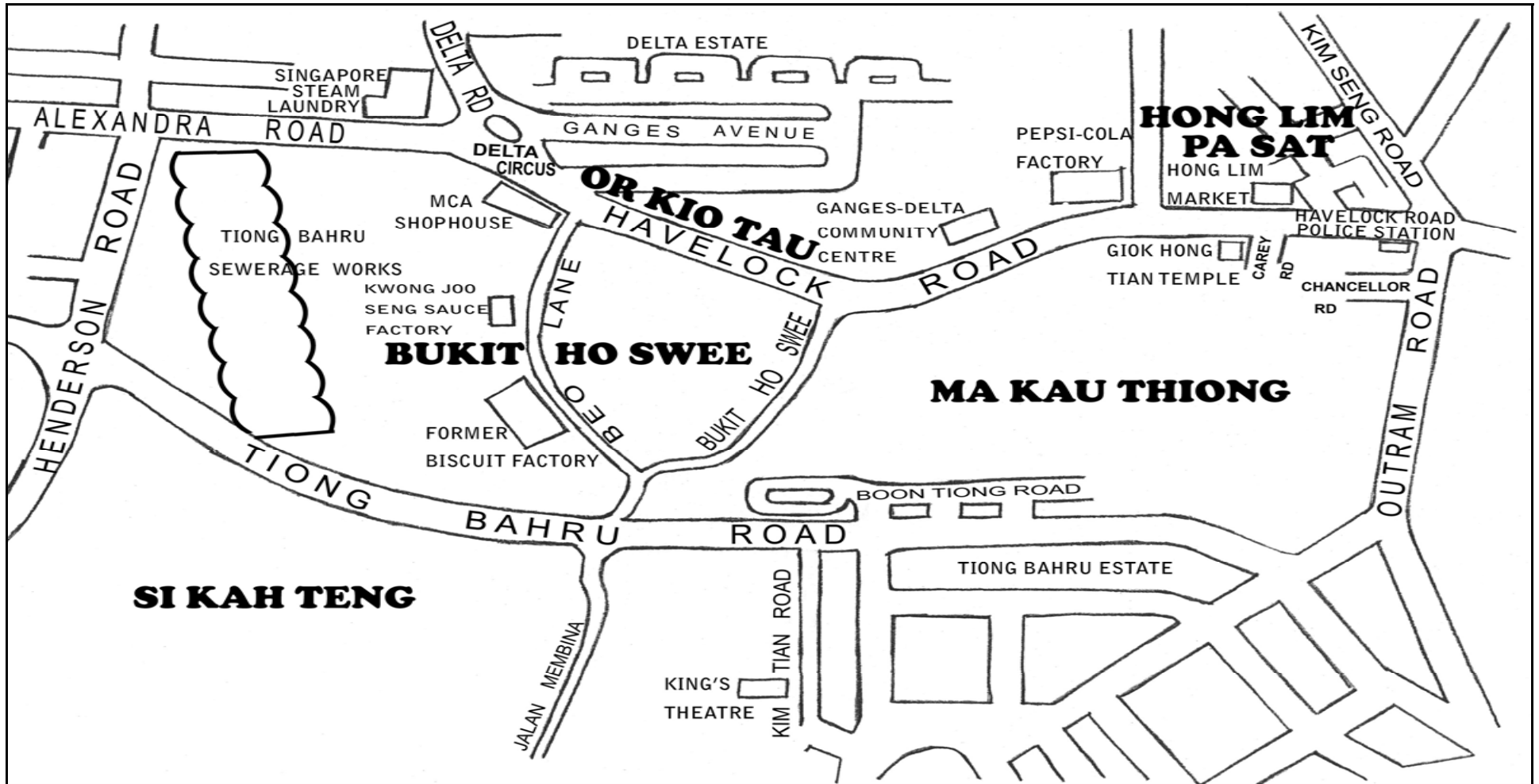
Kampong Bukit Ho Swee was a typical kampong in 1950s Singapore, possessing a geographically mobile low-income population which had found new

¹ The local Hokkien name for Kampong Tiong Bahru, referring to the four-legged pavilion shelters in the area.

² HB 842/1/52 Memo from Financial Officer, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 6 Apr 1961; Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment*, 2nd edition (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), p. 285. Ma Kau Thiong means ‘Cantonese cemetery’ in Hokkien. According to Yeoh, the cemetery, covering a size of 23 acres, was public and opened in 1840 for Cantonese and Hakka burials.

³ The local Hokkien name for Covent Garden.

Map 2.1: Localities of Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, 1960



Sources: Maps 80-81, *Street Directory and Guide to Singapore* (Singapore: Survey Department, 1957) and oral history interviews.

homes in unauthorised wooden housing built on the hilly land and disused graves in the area. This chapter charts the development of Chinese family life in Bukit Ho Swee and nearby kampongs from the early twentieth century to the emergence of a semi-autonomous social and economic community in the 1950s. As a result of their character, despite their proximity to the heart of the City, the kampongs were perceived by the state as 'black areas', notorious for crime, gangsterism and insanitary living. This chapter contends that urban kampong life, as actually experienced by various groups of dwellers themselves – the men, women and children – was different from such a preconception.

Origins

Little is known about the origins of Bukit Ho Swee, since much of the literature on early colonial Singapore has focussed on the more developed areas. Ho Chui Sua, its Hokkien name, while translating scenically as 'river', 'water' and 'hill' ('河水山'), was derived from the hill ('Bukit'), its dominant geographical feature, and the name of a Chinese merchant, Tay Ho Swee. Tay, born in Singapore in 1834, dealt in teak, opium and spirits.⁴ According to a descendant, Tay had acquired Bukit Ho Swee from the Crown, on which hill he constructed two large bungalows, one for residence and the other for the family's ancestral tablets. There was, at the time, opium and pepper cultivation on the hill but no other houses. When Tay died in 1903, his sons built 'more than ten' attap houses for let, with some '70-80' people residing in them before World War Two. Living largely on the rentals, the family's fortunes had apparently deteriorated as the residential bungalow and then the 'ancestral' house were sold off, the latter around 1947. Both buildings were destroyed in the 1961 fire and Tay's land acquired with compensation by the government.⁵

⁴ Song Ong Siang, *One Hundred Years' History of the Chinese in Singapore* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 119.

⁵ OHC, interview with Tay Kim Oh, 12 Jun 1989.



Plate 2.1: Tay Ho Swee, year unknown (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

The building of attap houses on Bukit Ho Swee coincided with Chinese leaving the Central Area in the early decades of the twentieth century. In 1908, when the Municipal Commissioners, after re-numbering Havelock Road, named three private roads along that stretch of Bukit Ho Swee – Carey Road, Bukit Ho Swee and Beo Lane – the area was observed to contain ‘a number of plank and attap houses’.⁶ In the 1920s, Tiong Bahru was already covered with wooden houses, ‘some on the hilly ground and many on stilts over the swamps with boards leading from hut to hut’, all lacking proper sanitation and drainage.⁷ By 1932, a dense collection of both permanent and temporary structures had sprung up in the hilly area encircled by Beo Lane and Bukit Ho Swee [road], with the former typically lining the roads and the latter gravitating inwards. This

⁶ Municipal Commission, *Minutes of Proceedings of the Municipal Commissioners*, 13 Dec 1907 and 28 Feb 1908. A few months before, in December 1907, Beo Lane and Bukit Ho Swee were given each other’s names, before the ‘residents and owners [probably the Tay family] of property in the higher part of Havelock Road’ petitioned successfully for the names to be swapped.

⁷ SIT 744/50, Draft Memo on the History and Development of Tiong Bahru Estate, 1950.

area, adjacent to Ma Kau Thiong, had been a Hokkien cemetery.⁸ Permanent buildings also stood along Havelock Road, particularly at the Carey Road corner.⁹

One of the early arrivals to the kampong was Wan Hong Cheong, who came to Singapore in 1920 at the age of sixteen with his parents and two younger sisters from Fukien province. Initially staying in the Central Area where they had disembarked, they then moved to rural Hougang before shifting to Bukit Ho Swee, where a fellow villager from China was residing and where it was more convenient to find work. Through friends, Wan did construction work at Hong Lim Pa Sat and also dabbled in other manual jobs. According to Wan, most households in inter-war Bukit Ho Swee were families, not singles. Apparently, 8 or 9 out of 10 dwellers in the 1920s were Hokkiens from Anxi Province in China. Many were bullock cart drivers, transporting rice and other goods from ships to warehouses and rearing a few cattle each; others cultivated vegetable plots. Wan's family rented a small room in an attap house for \$3 a month, sharing the house with another family. The dwellings, of which there were quite a few, were plank and attap but Wan remembered a Western-style bungalow owned by the Tay family, from whom his own family had rented. Some of the attap houses were let out for \$3-5 per month and sublet for \$1-2. The dwellings, Wan recalled, were not closely-built, with adequate space for the bullock carts to move through. Tan Kah Kee, the well-known Chinese businessman, established a large biscuit factory at Beo Lane. The typical elements of kampong life by the 1950s had become readily apparent to locals: the collection of water from public standpipes along Havelock Road, which the inhabitants called Or Kio Tau,¹⁰ the lack of sanitation with the rains washing out cattle dung into the open and pigs eating at the toilet area, the poorly maintained earthen tracks running through the kampong, and the presence of secret societies. Nonetheless, security was 'not bad, quite good', for although 'there were many *samsengs*' ['gangsters'], they did not cause trouble unless provoked. Overall, Wan surmised, there was not much official control. His family resided for more than two years at Bukit Ho

⁸ Singapore, *Report of the Committee Regarding Burial and Burial Grounds* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1952), p. 19.

⁹ FMS Survey 19/1932, Map of Singapore Town, 1932.

¹⁰ Literally, 'at the head of the black-painted bridge' in Hokkien, referring to referring to the portion of Havelock Road before the Delta Circus.

Swee before moving to Jurong.¹¹ Yet, according to Yeo Chin Hwa, another early resident, 1920s Bukit Ho Swee was far less urbanised: ‘In the early days, the villagers here worked as bullock cart drivers, manufactured mee or grew vegetables. Few worked in the city. In the past there were very few coffeeshops here. Even to drink a cup of coffee, we had to go far away’.¹²

Fire, Bombs and Sentries

Catastrophe first torched Bukit Ho Swee on 8 August 1934. The disaster indicated the permanent establishment of Chinese family life on the hill and warned the authorities of the difficulties of both subduing an urban kampong blaze and providing for the fire victims. The fire, started by an unascertained cause¹³ at 12.15 pm in an attap house on the eastern side of Si Kah Teng and fanned by a strong wind, spread with ‘lightning rapidity’ to engulf three densely-settled kampongs with more than 500 Chinese and Malay attap houses, burning down Bukit Ho Swee before jumping Havelock Road. At about 2 pm, it was subdued by fire-fighters making a stand on the flat ground at the foot of the hill. Even then, it took a ‘kindly change’ in the wind direction to turn the flames away from the timber yards and godowns of Covent Garden.¹⁴

Chinese families counted prominently among the fire victims. 1,989 fire victims (1,032 women and 957 men) were registered, comprising ‘humble Chinese coolies, Malay labourers and their wives and dependents’.¹⁵ Most were coolies working on the ships plying the Singapore River and their families, underlining the area’s link to the entrepot economy. While some of the fire victims were single men living in the nearby coolie lines, others were shipping coolies and clerks who had settled down and married,

¹¹ OHC, interview with Wan Hong Cheong, 24 Aug 1984.

¹² NAS, audio-visual recording titled *A Pictorial Exhibition: The Emergence Of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation To Progress*, broadcast in Nov 1983.

¹³ A Chinese newspaper suggested that the fire might be due to the frying of pig lard. *NYSP*, 10 Aug 1934.

¹⁴ *ST*, 9 Aug 1934; *MT*, 9 Aug 1934; *NYSP*, 9 Aug 1934.

¹⁵ *NYSP*, 11 Aug 1934; *ST*, 9 Aug 1934, 10 Aug 1934. Initial estimates ranged between 5,000 and 10,000 fire victims.

indicating how the immigration policies of the early 1930s had nurtured Chinese family life and directed it partially into the urban kampongs. The Havelock Road wooden houses, intended initially as temporary accommodation,¹⁶ had been occupied by the immigrating families. More than 600 homeless persons were temporarily housed at the nearby Great World Amusement Park, comprising 300 women, 200 men and over 100 children. These were the poorest fire victims who could not obtain accommodation from relatives or friends. Journalists saw ‘an ill-dressed Chinese woman getting into a ricksha with two infant babies in her arms and around her feet all that remained of her water-soaked and charred belongings’,¹⁷ while after the fire, ‘[s]tricken families searched among the ruins for trifles left behind’.¹⁸

The colonial municipal administration stated afterwards that its policy was to prohibit inflammable wooden housing from the town area and to gradually demolish those still in existence. It had also sought to ensure that wooden housing in planned kampongs conformed to building by-laws and maintain adequate space between the dwellings.¹⁹ The fire demonstrated that the official measures taken had not successfully managed and contained the fire hazard in the urban kampongs. The flames had been put out on the flat ground near the Singapore River, from which water could be pumped to the fire engines at high pressure.²⁰ However, they were unstoppable on the hill, which was already ablaze when the fire engines arrived, yet that was precisely where so many families lived. Once started, neither the fire brigade nor the kampong dwellers, who doused the roofs of their houses, could stem the advancing flames. But the locals reacted swiftly to the fire alarm, as ‘[f]aster than the fire spread the alarm and houses were vacated’.²¹ No lives were lost on this occasion, and in subsequent kampong fires, despite the great numbers of fire victims, reported deaths often remained few.

¹⁶ *ST*, 9 Aug 1934.

¹⁷ *ST*, 9 Aug 1934.

¹⁸ *ST*, 9 Aug 1934.

¹⁹ *ST*, 9 Aug 1934.

²⁰ *MT*, 9 Aug 1934.

²¹ *ST*, 9 Aug 1934.

The disaster elicited strong expressions of sympathy from social organisations and businessmen. The Hokkien Huay Kuan mobilised a substantial contingent of volunteer workers to collect subscriptions from the Chinese community and urged the fire victims to go to Thian Hock Keng Temple at Telok Ayer for temporary housing. By 11 August, the donations had exceeded the \$10,000 mark, remarkable for an economy still recovering from the world slump. The fire victims each received \$4 – roughly half the monthly wage of a Chinese labourer in the early 1930s²² – from the Hokkien Huay Kuan’s relief fund, while efforts were made to find employment for those put out of work. The rehousing problem grew, as the number of victims residing at Great World had risen to 1,000 by then. On the 13th, the Municipal Commission and the Chinese Protectorate moved a quarter of the fire victims, numbering 247 adults and 249 children, into a block of old 4-room SIT houses at Henderson Road previously slated for demolition.²³ The fire victims were given rent waivers but still had to pay for water and electricity.²⁴ The occupation was originally intended for a month but, at the end of August, it was extended by another month because, as the Secretary for Chinese Affairs admitted, there was ‘no chance of the Henderson Road houses being vacated’.²⁵ In October, however, the authorities were no longer willing to bear the financial costs of the occupation in the midst of the global depression. They decided to clear the premises. By mid-November, the fire victims had been removed from the Henderson Road houses, experiencing what amounted to a second round of dishousing.²⁶

At this point, all efforts at rehabilitation ended. The *Malaya Tribune*, representing the views of the domiciled English-speaking community, had suggested that ‘[t]he conflagration was perhaps for the best – best, that is, in the interests of the victims themselves’, for whom the government should build modern, sanitary tenement

²² MRCA Jul 1932, pp. 31-32; Loh Kah Seng, *Beyond ‘Rubber Prices’ History: Life in Singapore during the Great Depression Years*, unpublished Master of Arts Thesis, Department of History, National University of Singapore, 2004, p. 67.

²³ Municipal Commission, *Minutes of Proceedings of the Municipal Commissioners*, 10 Aug 1934.

²⁴ *ST*, 13 Aug 1934.

²⁵ SIT 714/34, Memo from Secretary of Chinese Affairs to Chairman, SIT, 31 Aug 1934.

²⁶ SIT 714/34, Memo from Secretary of Chinese Affairs to Chairman, SIT, 15 Nov 1934; Memo from Secretary of Chinese Affairs to Chairman, SIT, 19 Oct 1934.

houses on the fire site.²⁷ A week later, however, it was noted that no permanent homes had been provided.²⁸ Between 1936 and 1941, the SIT built 784 flats and 54 tenements on the attap area to the southeast which became Tiong Bahru Estate, but this was a project first undertaken as early as 1927.²⁹ The family of Chua Beng Huat (born 1946) was dishoused by the 1934 fire but, as he explained, ‘they just moved back and started again. My parents never lived away from Bukit Ho Swee for long. The neighbours were important to my mother particularly’.³⁰ The attap ash-ridden ruins of prewar Bukit Ho Swee were reclaimed and rebuilt by the dwellers themselves.

Then came the world war. Given the dearth of English-language official records on this period, the best alternative source is oral history. I do not pretend at a representative account of kampong life during the war, but oral history provides insights and memories into how the Japanese years touched the dwellers, from the bombs which abruptly and dramatically killed, to the Japanese checkpoints, which illustrated how the kampong’s economic life was suddenly overlaid with a Japanese security regime.

The rain of bombs which signalled the start of the Japanese attack down the Malay peninsula towards Singapore targeted developed, built-up areas; consequently Bukit Ho Swee, as an urban kampong, was not spared. Air Raid Precaution (ARP) teams had been formed to help warn and evacuate the residents.³¹ Lee Beng Kway, who had come to Singapore in 1931, was studying at Kai Kok Public School on the slopes of Bukit Ho Swee. One day, Lee as usual walked from his home in Ulu Pandan to school but found only the principal there, who told him the area had been bombed and warned him to go home. Walking down Havelock Road, Lee saw that more than ten attap houses had collapsed during the bombing raid and a team of men were digging out bodies. Lee ‘stood there watching for a while. Here and there were rows of bodies. There were elderly people and young adults, men and women, and children, arranged in

²⁷ *MT*, 10 Aug 1934.

²⁸ *ST*, 11 Aug 1934, 16 Aug 1934.

²⁹ SIT, *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947*, p. 11; SIT 744/50, Draft Memo on the History and Development of Tiong Bahru Estate, 1950.

³⁰ Author’s interview with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006.

³¹ One ARP volunteer recalled a bomb which landed at Eng Watt Street in the middle of Tiong Bahru Estate but failed to explode. OHC, interview with Tan Mok Lee, 26 Jul 2002.

rows like fish being sold at the market. Some had missing arms and legs. There were also small children'.³²

Yap Ah Sai, a *tu tu* hawker born in 1928, lived in the kampong until the 1961 fire. Tan Kah Kee's biscuit factory in Beo Lane where his mother worked was still operating at the time. As Yap recalled, the first Japanese bomb landed behind the factory, at the Tiong Bahru sewerage works. In their air raid drills, the kampong dwellers had learnt to extinguish their lights at night when the air raid sirens sounded and to dig wooden shelters. Yap had relatives in rural Bukit Timah and Changi but his family had stayed put, since 'life for poor people was like that, whether there was a war or not'. Some residents, he recalled, were killed while trying to flee to Changi during the bombing raids.

Making a living during the Japanese Occupation forced many dwellers to negotiate between their long-standing economic ties to the Central Area and the security controls and constraints imposed by the new regime. Public checkpoints, manned by Japanese sentries to whom passers-by had to bow and show their passes as a 'rite of passage', constituted the sudden creation of a 'landscape of fear'.³³ There were, as Yap recalled, two or three sentry posts between Bukit Ho Swee and 'Big Town', mostly in Outram. He was relatively fortunate in being able to negotiate daily such checks to make a living in the Central Area. One of the sentries was friendly, teaching him to say '*ohayo gozaimasu*' ('Good morning'), which he used with good effect for two months. Yap first sold the *Syonan Times* in 'Big Town', walking from the kampong to Outram to collect the newspapers at 4 am. Since few people bought the papers, he later became a stevedore at a godown with the help of a fellow kampong dweller. Yap would walk daily to Kampong Bahru where the godown was located. He worked there for half a year, carrying bags of flour and rice, earning 38 cents in the day and 46 cents at night.

³² OHC, interview with Lee Beng Kway, 8 Oct 1984.

³³ Brenda S. A. Yeoh & Kamalini Ramdas, 'Remembering Darkness: Spectacle, Surveillance and the Spaces of Everyday Life in Syonan-to', in P. Lim Pui Huen & Diana Wong (eds), *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2000), pp. 160, 172-73.

Work was slack as the Japanese overseers left at noon to escape the heat, and he often only had to work for 4 out of 8 hours a day.³⁴

Lee Ah Gar, whose family relocated briefly to Geylang Serai after the war, had just moved into an attap house at Beo Lane when the Japanese attacked. He knew about the devastation of the bombing:

There were ground tremors when the planes started bombing, in rows of seven, 49 planes in all. When they came in – *hong, hong, hong, hong* – the ground shook. Down at Beo Lane, my father and I saw it with our own eyes. There were many female workers in the oil factory picking peanuts for making oil. There was supposed to be an air raid procedure, they had been warned not to run out in an air raid but to hide in the shelter in the factory until the warning siren stopped. That day was especially chaotic. 49 planes coming. One woman panicked, ran out and was hit by either a bomb or machine gun [fire]. She fell, her organs ripped out and spilling onto the road. The ARP could only pick up the organs and body parts and put them in a white bag, separate from the body. The organs were still moving like a snake. The hill was hit by bombs and fell over and the houses at the foot of the hill were buried by the landslide. Many families were killed and the rubbish trucks were filled with dead bodies.

Lee, too, knew about the fear of encountering the Japanese checkpoints. One was located opposite the Havelock Road police station at the junction with Outram Road. There were stationed the Kempeitai, the Japanese military police. He related one frightening incident:

When you walked past there, you must bow to them. There was a woman who paid no attention. They stripped her. Opposite was a coffeeshop,

³⁴ OHC, interview with Yap Ah Sai, 3 Aug 1983.

and a man was watching there. Seeing this, the Japanese could not stand it. The Japanese made him walk over. The man was also stripped, and the woman and the man were made to face each other and hit each other. We quickly walked away and didn't know when they stopped. This was one Japanese checkpoint, and the next one at the junction of Cantonment Road and Outram Road, at the corner of New Bridge Road, was another dangerous area. The next one was at Bukit Pasoh [east of New Bridge Road].

It was common then to see people die. Most of the dead were sent to GH [General Hospital], and those with families would be claimed. Most people knew that you should just close the coffin but not nail the lid down. Some people who didn't know nailed it down. When you reached the police station at the traffic junction, you had a big problem. The soldiers would stop you and check the coffins, using the bayonets of their rifles.³⁵

The Shadow Economy

As had been the case after the 1934 fire, Bukit Ho Swee recovered from the ravages of war. The postwar years witnessed massive in-filling of wooden housing. The 1948 Royal Air Force aerial photograph (Plate 2.2) indicates visible space between the dwellings around Beo Lane and Bukit Ho Swee [road] up to the lower slopes of Ma Kau Thiong, the unoccupied cemetery. By 1958, however, newly-built houses had sprung up in the previously open spaces (see Plate 2.3). In the official estimates, the kampong had 231 wooden houses (totalling 2,772 dwellers) in 1948 and by 1957, 19,017 persons, while the 1961 fire rendered 2,800 families (15,694 people) homeless. The neighbouring larger Silat-Tiong Bahru kampong had 422 wooden houses (5,064

³⁵ Author's interview with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006.

dwellers) in 1948 and by 1957, 45,675 persons.³⁶ Tay Ah Chuan, born in Bukit Ho Swee in 1939, observed that ‘when I was young, the houses were not so crowded. Later, they were joined to one another until they were very congested’. His father, a lorry driver who was previously a bullock cart driver, was a long-time resident in the area.³⁷

Bukit Ho Swee in the immediate postwar era was a slum of hope, whose dwellers were attempting to *che lor* (‘find a road’). They naturally gravitated towards the kampong’s roads, factories, coffeeshops, and graves, public spaces which marked out its social and economic contours. Much of the residents’ daily work and social life lay outside the discipline imposed by regular wage employment and the official norms of what was considered proper, safe and clean living, and was consequently considered local, loosely-structured or illegal.

Although many of the residents were still economically tied to the Central Area, the kampong developed its own economy. This is not to de-emphasise the extent of unemployment (4.9% in 1957) or under-employment in Singapore but it illustrates how low-income Chinese families coped with such a predicament. Bukit Ho Swee’s local economy consequently managed to exist in a state of substantial, although not full, equilibrium, indicating how the irregular employment patterns characteristic of the wider economy had been, to a large extent, institutionalised in the kampong economy.³⁸ As light secondary and small-scale industries grew in importance in the 1950s,³⁹ so the small-and medium-scale factories and shops dotted throughout Bukit Ho Swee provided localised work for many residents. The jobs were typically daily- or piece-rated, irregular, part- time, and low-paying, but they enabled family members to supplement the main household income or, if this was lacking, to pool resources together. Women

³⁶ The figures are from SIT 808/50, Memo by W. E. Hutchinson (Deputy Municipal Health Officer) to Municipal Health Officer, 31 Aug 1948, and Singapore, *Report of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party* (Singapore: Printed at the Government Printing Office, 1956), pp. 14-15; and P. Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970, Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 238.

³⁷ Author’s interviews with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006 and 13 Sep 2006.

³⁸ Iain Buchanan, ‘The Fringe-dwellers: Some Socio-economic Problems of Singapore’s Low-Cost Housing Scheme, with Particular Reference to the Resettlement of Squatters’, *Geographica*, 4, 1968, p. 64.

³⁹ Singapore, *Annual Report 1953*, p. 76; Singapore, *Annual Report 1957*, p. 120.



Plate 2.2: Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, 1948. Royal Air Force, Sortie No. 81/269, 1948 (Courtesy of Ministry of Defence).



Plate 2.3: Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, 1958. The wooden houses are now obviously more closely built together. The SIT has also built flats at Boon Tiong Road at the bottom right of the picture. Royal Air Force, RAF Ref. No. 81/8816, 1958 (Courtesy of Ministry of Defence).

and youngsters, in particular, were important contributors to this economic life.⁴⁰ On average, a family of four in the 1950s could survive on a minimum of \$102 a month.⁴¹

The roads of Bukit Ho Swee, historically the sites of major building and development, were nodes of economic activity. As Map 1 and Plate 1 in the Appendix show, the area bounded by Beo Lane and Bukit Ho Swee [road] remained the kampong's most developed locale. Tan Kah Kee's biscuit factory at 40 Beo Lane was now defunct but had been converted into warehouses storing commodities like coffee beans, dried chilli, rubber, and copra. There were also at the junction of the two roads a medical shop, a coffeeshop, a barber shop, and provisions shops, while down the hill towards Havelock Road stood numerous shophouses, more coffeeshops and teahouses, a vegetarian hall, laundry shops, barber shops, and soya sauce and peanut oil factories (one being the well-known Kwong Joo Seng 'Chicken Brand' soya sauce factory at the western edge of Beo Lane).

The shopowners were the kampong's wealthier residents and often had extended families living in the kampong's larger and better-built wooden houses.⁴² The family of Chua Beng Huat – his parents had returned after the 1934 fire with nine brothers and sisters – stayed at 60 Bukit Ho Swee at the junction of the two roads. They, according to Chua, owned 'a big provision shop plus a big house with a very large sitting room and a very big room for storing flour because my dad had been trading in flour'. At the end of the war, his father started a transportation company, while his mother ran the provisions shop.⁴³ Another provisions shop, Yong Kee, was located above Havelock Road at 10 Beo Lane, close to Kwong Joo Seng factory. It was established by Lim Soo Hiang's grandmother after the family moved into the kampong at the time of the Japanese attack on Malaya. When the old lady passed away, Lim's mother took over the running of the

⁴⁰ Teh Weng Kuang, *The Urban Squatters in Singapore: Its Growth and Clearance*, unpublished Master's Thesis in Urban Planning, Faculty of Architecture, University of Singapore, 1972, pp. 4.14-4.15.

⁴¹ Goh Keng Swee, *Urban Incomes and Housing: A Report on the Social Survey of Singapore, 1953-54* (Singapore: Department of Social Welfare, 1956), p. 125.

⁴² Chua Beng Huat, 'The Business of Living in Singapore', in Kernial S. Sandhu & Paul Wheatley (eds), *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), p. 1005.

⁴³ Author's interview with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006.

shop, while her father operated a camera shop in Change Alley in the town area. The couple and their seven children lived in two large bedrooms at the back of the provisions shop.⁴⁴

Close by above Havelock Road, Tan Tiam Ho (born 1936), son of a lorry driver, stayed with his parents, grandmother and three sisters in an attap house. Having leased the land from the government, they built wooden houses and let them out each for \$10-15 a month. Because, as Tan explained, ‘my father was struggling to provide for the family’, his mother also worked in the Kwong Joo Seng factory, sorting through peanuts.⁴⁵ Such manual work was piece-rated and low-paying, as was sifting through bags of coffee beans in one of the warehouses at Beo Lane, which, according to Wang Ah Tee (born 1943), paid \$3 per bag. Wang’s family of eleven resided at 37 Beo Lane; his father was a hawker, his elder brothers and sisters worked at the warehouse, while Wang was a restaurant assistant in ‘Little Town’.⁴⁶ Even so, ‘people then had no jobs and would even quarrel over the coffee bags’.⁴⁷ Brothers Lee Ah Gar and Lee Soo Seong (born 1938) and their family had moved into Beo Lane after their family’s fish-rearing business in MacPherson was evicted from the area around 1940. Their father, Lee Chek Chin, initially worked in Kwong Joo Seng factory while Ah Gar, a teenager, helped out briefly in a provisions shop.⁴⁸

More shops and half a dozen coffeeshops stood along Tiong Bahru Road to the south (see Map 2 and Plate 2 in the Appendix). The family of Tay Bok Chiu (born 1944) owned a small provisions shop in a 2-storey zinc-roofed building there, selling *ikan bilis* and fish, crabs, onions, dried chilli, noodles, and groceries. His father obtained his goods from the Central Area, transporting them back on his trishaw.⁴⁹ The father of

⁴⁴ Author’s interview with Lim Soo Hiang, 2 Jan 2008.

⁴⁵ Author’s interview with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007.

⁴⁶ Author’s interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007.

⁴⁷ Author’s interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

⁴⁸ Author’s interviews with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006 and Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

⁴⁹ Author’s interview with Tay Bok Chiu, 24 Jan 2007.

Pang Ming Toh (born 1948) operated a barber shop in the area. It was fairly deep, and the business was carried out in the front while the family lived at the back.⁵⁰

At Or Kio Tau, as Map 3 and Plate 3 in the Appendix indicate, and where Beo Lane reached Havelock Road, were numerous shops and other businesses. The dominating building here was the 3-storey shophouse along the main road owned by the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and built just before the war.⁵¹ The shophouse's upper storeys were residences but its ground storey was a focal point of economic activity: four coffeeshops, a Teochew porridge eating house, a barber shop, a Chinese medical hall, two provisions shops, a shop making clogs, and a Chinese bank. Born in 1949 to a Hainanese family, Lim You Meng stayed in a sizeable attap house at 22 Beo Lane behind the shophouse. Lim's father was a coffee maker in one of the coffeeshops, run by Lim's uncle.⁵² Another enterprise there was a charcoal shop named Hiap Soon, owned by the mother-in-law of Ong Ah Sai (born 1930), who when she married into the family lived there and ran the business.⁵³

The registered enterprises at the shophouse jostled for space and profit with the unregulated activities which gravitated there. This was also the location of what the Chinese called the Or Kio Tau market.⁵⁴ One half of the bazaar was a wet market while cooked food was sold in the other. Among the bunches of vegetables laid out on the floor was *kangkong*, Lim You Meng observed, grown on the fertile soil at the sewerage works. As he recalled, the market was open the whole day; in the morning, food like *char bee hoon* and fritters was sold by the roadside, while in the afternoon, hawkers set up their business outside the market, selling groceries, *yong tau foo* and cloth. It was, according to Lim, 'very lively in the afternoon and evening. You could just set up a simple stall to sell food, it was unregulated'.⁵⁵ Living on the outskirts of Hong Lim Pa

⁵⁰ Author's interview with Pang Ming Toh, 21 Oct 2006.

⁵¹ According to Lee Ah Gar, the shophouse was named Goh Aup Aik at one point. Author's interview with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006.

⁵² Author's interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

⁵³ Author's interview with Ong Ah Sai, 19 Apr 2007.

⁵⁴ The Mandarin name for the market was 新和兴.

⁵⁵ Author's interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.



Plate 2.4: Bicycles and cars on the one-way Havelock Road. On the left is the dominant MCA shophouse, while across the road, mostly obscured, are wooden houses and small businesses, c. 1950s (Courtesy of Wong Pok Hee).



Plate 2.5: A provisions shop located on the ground floor of the MCA shophouse, c. 1950s. On the right is a female trishaw hawker with hat (Courtesy of Wong Pok Hee).



Plate 2.6: The empty space behind the MCA shophouse which sometimes served as a makeshift basketball court, c. 1950s. In the background is a row of two storey permanent housing. Walking towards the building is a hawker (Courtesy of Wong Pok Hee).

Sat, Teo Khoon Wah (born 1951) knew the market well:

There was a market at Or Kio Tau which was Hong Lim Pa Sat's rival. You went to one or the other in those days. Or Kio Tau I think was cheaper and bigger. I worked in the market for a short while when I was young. I was helping my elder brother who was selling pig stomach. He was in his 20s and had only primary school education. The business at Or Kio Tau was better as there were more people. The market was just individual stalls set up in front of the shops by the roadside. Some of the stalls were mounted on a trishaw.⁵⁶

From this stretch of Havelock Road up to Ganges Avenue, residential and commercial buildings mingled, as wooden housing alternated with shophouses, provisions shops, a shop selling coffee powder, sauce factories, sawmills, melon seed factories, *karang guni* ('junk') shops, tyre shops, motor workshops, a goldsmith, an

⁵⁶ Author's interview with Teo Khoon Wah, 23 Mar 2007.

incense shop, and a gambling house. There, the family of Goh Yong Soo (born 1947), lived and prepared their business. His father, a cloth-seller, brought his goods, first by trishaw and later by pickup, to sell at the 'Fire City', at the eastern edge of the Central Area.⁵⁷

Further north, at the junction of Havelock and Delta roads were another three sites of local employment, the Singapore Steam Laundry, Seiclene Electric Laundry and the Fraser and Neave factory across the road. James Seah (born 1948), his parents and four siblings lived in a wooden house at 20 Beo Lane. His father took a bus to the Central Area daily, where he worked as a book-keeper for a trading company. His three sisters worked in the steam laundry.⁵⁸ The mother and three elder sisters, too, of Wong Pok Hee, who had migrated from Johor and whose father had passed away, worked in the electric laundry. According to Wong, his mother and sisters were able to support the family. Wong, a teenager, also worked as a provisions shop assistant at the Or Kio Tau shophouse.⁵⁹

More shophouses, factories and businesses lined Havelock Road eastwards (see Map 4 and Plate 4 in the Appendix). There were coffeeshops, a petrol kiosk, a barber shop, an Indian shop selling spices, two laundry shops, the Adrian cane factory, and the long-established Pepsi-Cola factory. Lum Siang Onn (born 1939) married into a family which ran a laundry shop called Ho Sing in this area, on the ground floor of a shophouse, above which they lived.⁶⁰ Towards the end of the road were a factory making shoe polish, a sauce factory, a pepper factory, Sinsen soap factory, and more warehouses. The family of Roy Chan (born 1942), having shifted from Telok Ayer in 'Big Town', stayed at 585 and 587 Havelock Road at the foot of Ma Kau Thiong. The extended family of twelve resided in a large wooden longhouse while Chan's

⁵⁷ Author's interview with Goh Yong Soo, 25 Jul 2007.

⁵⁸ Author's interview with James Seah, 21 Oct 2006.

⁵⁹ Author's interview with Wong Pok Hee, 19 Apr 2007.

⁶⁰ Author's interview with Lum Siang Onn, 4 Aug 2007.

grandfather owned two small factories making soap and later wooden crates in the other building.⁶¹

The business and population areas of Bukit Ho Swee attracted another economic group: the street hawkers. Buoyed by the growth of the resident population, it was estimated in 1950 that the number of hawkers in the Tiong Bahru area had doubled within several years.⁶² Comprising licensed and frequently unlicensed itinerant peddlers, street side vendors and stallholders, they gathered at key places of local commercial and social activity. The fare was cheap and local: different kinds of noodles and *kway*, *yong tau foo*, *rojak*, and ice water. Hawking had historically functioned in Singapore as an outlet for surplus labour and a safety net for the poorer classes. They could turn to hawking in difficult times without much skill or capital, although it could also be financially attractive in an economic upturn.⁶³ In turn, the supply of cheap, easily accessible hawker food satisfied the demand of working households whose adults did not have the time to cook.

Besides the Or Kio Tau market, hawkers congregated at cinemas at the Great World Amusement Park north of Hong Lim Pa Sat and King's Theatre along Kim Tian Road in Si Kah Teng.⁶⁴ The numerous temples in Beo ('temple') Lane and the two temples at the eastern end of Havelock Road also drew hawkers. Briefly, Teo Khoon Wah recalled, his mother and siblings sold porridge beside the Pepsi-Cola factory, where there was also an Indian stall selling tea. It was, Teo maintained, good business because of the factory workers leaving after work. At Carey Road, near the Ti Kong Tua temple, where there was also pedestrian traffic, there were 4-5 hawker stalls, selling *chai tow kway*, ice, *char kway teow*, and a small barber shop.⁶⁵ Another magnet for hawkers were the local schools, since many parents gave their children money to buy

⁶¹ Author's interviews with Roy Chan, 7 Mar 2007 & 2 Apr 2007.

⁶² Memo from Chairman, Singapore People Hawkers' Union, in Singapore, *Report of the Hawkers Inquiry Commission* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1950), p. 62.

⁶³ *Report of the Hawkers Inquiry Commission*, p. 9.

⁶⁴ SIT 658/54, Memo from Estates Officer, SIT, to Acting Estates Manager, SIT, 14 Jul 1955.

⁶⁵ Author's interview with Teo Khoon Wah, 23 Mar 2007.

their lunch from them.⁶⁶ Lim You Meng, studying at Kai Kok Public School, invariably found hawkers at the school gates selling drinks and snacks.⁶⁷ Oh Gek Heok (born 1953), who with her brother Oh Boon Eng (born 1948) and her family stayed at 597-E Bukit Ho Swee below Ma Kau Thiong, could buy a slice of fish cake from a trishaw hawker for five cents outside Seng Poh School.⁶⁸

Some were hawkers by trade but hawking was more frequently a form of part-time or short-term work than the vocation of the 'self-employed'. In 1952, when the City Council ceased its raids against illegal hawkers, it inadvertently encouraged a substantial expansion of part-time, unlicensed hawking.⁶⁹ There were an estimated 20,000-25,000 hawkers in Singapore in 1955, of whom 3,000-4,000 were itinerants.⁷⁰ The 1950 survey of hawkers in the Municipal area found that only 16% were professionals, with the rest hawking to either support a family, to earn a higher income than a labourer's wage (although 90% earned less than \$5 a day), and because they were unable to find any other work or were too weak or old to do so. According to the survey, 67% were men, 21% women and 12% children (74% males and 26% females), while nearly half had started hawking at the end of the war.⁷¹ Although it was not uncommon for boys to hawk in prewar Singapore,⁷² after the war, more girls – 40% of all child hawkers – were hawking in 1950.

Lee Chek Chin, the father of Ah Gar and Soo Seong, was a professional hawker in Bukit Ho Swee. A Teochew, many of whom were traditionally in the occupation, he started selling *rojak* and later *tau suan* using a makeshift stall at the Or Kio Tau shophouse during the war, as the Kwong Joo Seng factory had ceased manufacturing. But because 'he couldn't hit his target and he always had a lot of *rojak* left unsold', his

⁶⁶ *Report of the Hawkers Inquiry Commission*, p. 7.

⁶⁷ Author's interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

⁶⁸ Author's interview with Oh Gek Heok, 1 Apr 2007.

⁶⁹ Thio Kheng-lock, A Study of 'Twenty Singapore Hawkers', unpublished academic exercise, Department of Social Studies, University of Singapore, 1963, pp. 11-12.

⁷⁰ CC, Report of the Special Hawkers Committee, *Minutes of Proceedings 1955*, p. 711.

⁷¹ *Report of the Hawkers Inquiry Commission*, pp. 68-70, 93.

⁷² Katherine Yeo Lian Bee, *Hawkers and the State in Colonial Singapore: Mid-nineteenth Century to 1939*, unpublished M.A. thesis, Department of History, Monash University, 1989, pp. 29-33.

wife, Lim Ah Nee, and Ah Gar also hawked, selling fried bananas, tapiocas and sweet potatoes during the Japanese Occupation. Ah Nee later became a fish hawker, who walked with her fish stall from Bukit Ho Swee along the Singapore River to New Market Road to obtain the fish every morning, ‘braving robberies’. According to Soo Seong, ‘the income from her work was just enough to make ends meet and send us to school’. After the war, Ah Gar sold *gado gado* and crystal buns prepared by his mother, and the elder Lee later taught him, still in his teens, to sell *rojak*. Ah Gar hawked and did a number of brief odd-jobs before obtaining regular employment as a foreman with Robinsons Company in 1951.⁷³ Similarly, with his three sisters and four brothers, Samuel Seetoh (born 1944) moved into 172 Kampong Tiong Bahru in 1956. His father sold buns in Tanjong Pagar and so did he, starting when he was about 13 and still in school, pushing his cart through Bukit Ho Swee to the Or Kio Tau market, always fearing the stray dogs along the way.⁷⁴ In the postwar years, hawking was consequently an occupation in which the family worked as a single economic unit.⁷⁵

Few kampong dwellers shared the official concern with contaminated hawker food,⁷⁶ instead emphasising its affordability and flavour. Madam Wong, caretaker of the Giok Hong Tian temple at the end of Havelock Road, insisted:

Opposite the temple was someone selling minced meat noodles, 20 cents, *yong tau foo*, 20 cents, *laksa*, 20 cents, a large bowl, and Teochew noodles at the corner. The food was clean! It was sold by people who lived behind us. They washed the ingredients at the public tap here, the intestines. The *yong tau foo* had many ingredients: salted vegetables, intestines, pig stomach, *yong tau foo*, fishballs, all in one bowl.⁷⁷

⁷³ Author’s interviews with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006 & Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

⁷⁴ Author’s interview with Samuel Seetoh, 27 Apr 2007.

⁷⁵ *Report of the Hawkers Inquiry Commission*, p. 8.

⁷⁶ Memo on the Hawker Problem by the Acting Municipal Health Officer, *Report of the Hawkers Inquiry Commission*, p. 35.

⁷⁷ Author’s interview with Madam Wong, 2 Nov 2006.

In Hong Lim Pa Sat, Joyce Soh, whose family usually had some variety of noodles at home in the afternoon, recalled a trishaw hawker selling delicious *yong tau foo* and stressed that ‘we didn’t feel that the hawkers were unclean, we had no problems at all eating the food all along’.⁷⁸ Enjoying the inexpensive hawker fare, too, Tan Tiam Ho protested, ‘We didn’t feel that the food was dirty! We were used to it. The hawkers were hygienic, they were not very dirty’.⁷⁹

Moving regularly between places and people, hawkers served as the eyes, ears and mouths of the kampong:

The marketplace was a place where buyers and sellers met. It was a marketplace for information. Some people tell the hawker, the hawker tells somebody. The hawkers would inform the residents about certain events that were organised. So the hawkers during those days were the people’s first point of contact with kampong folks. [*What would hawkers talk about?*] It was all sorts of news, such as what the open-air cinemas were going to show, price increase and price decrease, market announcements, when someone passed away. They were gatherers of information and they were also information providers.⁸⁰

The dwellings themselves were in many cases also places of work. This continued the tradition of Chinese life in the Central Area, where the shophouse combined business and residence. Where space permitted, kampong dwellers engaged in semi-rural activities, rearing a few chickens, ducks and pigs, cultivating vegetables or growing fruit trees. Sometimes the livestock was caged or fenced in, at other times, they ranged freely. The pigs, known as *gu ni te* (‘milk pigs’) and sold when they attained a certain size, supplemented the family income.⁸¹ Other produce was often not sold but

⁷⁸ Author’s interview with Joyce Soh, 5 Apr 2007.

⁷⁹ Author’s interview with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007.

⁸⁰ Author’s interview with James Seah, 21 Oct 2006.

⁸¹ OHC, interview with Lee Soo Seong, 19 Nov 1996.

consumed by the family, helping to reduce the daily cost of living, or at times given to relatives or neighbours in gestures of mutual self-help.



Plate 2.7: Large pig feeding at an interior road in Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, c. 1960 (Courtesy of Ivan Polunin).

Behind the Or Kio Tau market where Lim You Meng and his family lived was a plot of land for rearing pigs and poultry and growing vegetables like chilli, bitter gourd and sweet potatoes.⁸² These subsistence activities engaged the housewife and, to a lesser extent, the children. Nearby, outside Tan Tiam Ho's house, the family grew vegetables like sweet potatoes, red vegetables and brinjals, 'not much because there was not much space so it was not for sale'. As Tan explained, 'You just had to water them. Even children knew how to do it. My mother took care of the pigs and poultry, and we children also had to help out. We did a bit and then we went off to play'.⁸³ Lee Soo Seong, whose father formerly reared fish, observed that he was 'very experienced'; as a festive occasion approached, he bought fish fry and chicks in advance and reared them

⁸² Author's interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

⁸³ Author's interview with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007.

in the little space in front of the house, so that when they matured, the family could use some themselves and sell the rest.⁸⁴

The three little pigs reared by Tay Yan Woon's family, who had shifted to Bukit Ho Swee after an earlier fire in Si Kah Teng, lived in a pig sty within their attap house, next to the kitchen. The pigs, and the poultry they also reared, required minimum upkeep:

When someone else's sow gave birth, we bought the piglets and reared them until the sows gave birth. Then we reared the piglets and so on. As for chickens and ducks, hawkers would sell them and we reared them until they became adults. We fed the leftovers from our meals to the pigs, and those who did not rear pigs also gave their leftovers. We also walked to Tiong Bahru to collect leftovers from other families, or we went to the market there to collect cabbage stems that people didn't want.⁸⁵

Other varieties of piecemeal work took place within the confines of the home. Some women, technically 'housewives', washed or sewed clothes or did handicraft at home. Lim You Meng's mother, who at one time sorted coffee beans at Beo Lane, also washed some laundry.⁸⁶ For Tan Ah Kok, whose father, a lighterman, had passed away when the *twakow* capsized, the house became the main means of income: 'My mother helped people to look after their children and I helped her. The children were from the town area, from Craig Road where we previously stayed. The pay wasn't a lot, only \$20 a month'.⁸⁷ The house was also the sanctuary for illicit activities such as gambling and opium-smoking.⁸⁸ Lee Soo Seong's landlord moonlighted, making Chinese wine at night. Government inspectors arrested the offenders on numerous occasions but many

⁸⁴ OHC, interview with Lee Soo Seong, 19 Nov 1996; author's interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

⁸⁵ Author's interview with Tay Yan Woon, 28 Sep 2007.

⁸⁶ Author's interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

⁸⁷ Author's interview with Tan Ah Kok, 22 Mar 2007.

⁸⁸ Author's interview with Roy Chan, 2 Apr 2007.

families remained undeterred and neighbours continued to warn one another when the inspectors arrived.⁸⁹

Another form of illegal work plied along Havelock and Tiong Bahru roads. Ordinarily these carriageways served kampong dwellers working in the Central Area who cycled to work or took a bus. Two buses linked Bukit Ho Swee to the town: the Singapore Traction Company's No. 9 running between Delta Road and Raffles Quay, starting from 10 cents for the first mile, and several Hock Lee Amalgamated Bus Company services along Tiong Bahru Road, starting from 5 cents for the first mile.⁹⁰ By comparison, pirate taxis – private cars which could charge low fares because they did not pay license fees – could be hired cheaply, for example, 20 cents for a trip from Or Kio Tau to Upper Cross Street in 'Big Town', and more for places further away. Bukit Ho Swee's residents often took the pirate taxis but also drove them, cruising between Havelock Road and Princess House to the west, slowing down near prospective passengers and beckoning them with a wave or the sound of a horn. The authorities conceded that, compared to public buses, they were popular because of their 'comparative speeds and comfort'.⁹¹ As Roy Chan observed, pirate taxis were popular as the fare was cheap and they were faster than the buses.⁹² There were, in 1956, some 5,000 pirate taxis in Singapore. As one former driver explained,

In the '50s, I drove a pirate taxi. It was good money. Cars were cheap and I bought one for only about \$1,000. You could earn tens of dollars a day, so why wasn't it good? Life was very comfortable. It was 20 or 30 cents to town. Everyone would know which was a pirate taxi. You just

⁸⁹ OHC, interview with Lee Soo Seong, 19 Nov 1996.

⁹⁰ Singapore, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Public Passenger Transport System of Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1956), p. 77; *Street Directory and Guide to Singapore* (Singapore: Survey Department, 1957), pp. 151, 154. The Hock Lee Bus Company services were Nos. 3, 8 and 7.

⁹¹ Singapore, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Public Passenger Transport System of Singapore*, pp. 89-90.

⁹² Author's interview with Roy Chan, 7 Mar 2007.

horned, *tut, tut, tut, tut*. You just waited by the roadside and the car would come over.⁹³

Other forms of daily-rated and irregular employment were found in the Central Area or even beyond. Tan Geok Hak, having shifted numerous times nearby before settling in Bukit Ho Swee, was an *amah* in Sembawang for a British family employed at the Naval Base; she took a bus daily to her workplace while a nanny babysat her three children.⁹⁴ So was Joyce Soh's mother, who cleaned the house of a European family in Tanglin. Soh herself, after quitting school, also worked in a European home on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for one to two years before she got married. For two hours of work a day, she earned \$50 a month, 'quite a big amount then'.⁹⁵ Sim Kim Boey, the arrival from Batu Pahat living with her sister-in-law, found work closer to home after her husband passed away around 1957, in a tobacco factory at Tanjong Pagar, earning \$1.80 a day.⁹⁶

Many lowly-educated women and youths worked in the little-studied occupation of ship cleaners. In 1958 and 1959, between 1,500 and 2,500 persons a month, mostly Cantonese women, toiled at the Singapore Harbour Board dockyard at Keppel Harbour, cleaning the sides, bulkheads, funnels, and decks of cargo ships and scraping and disinfecting tanks in temperatures often above 32°C. The cleaners had to wait for long hours in the early morning before a selected few would receive work tickets from the contractors. The women, in particular, were paid less than the men, although they were specially sought for the hazardous tank cleaning, since 'being slim, they can more easily enter the aperture of the tank and sustain the hardship of working within its restricted space'.⁹⁷ To help support Jimmy Yi's large family in Kampong Silat, his mother augmented the income of his father, a carpenter, by working as a *long sai* (corruption of 'alongside'). She earned \$4.70 a day, although Yi, who worked there briefly during his

⁹³ Author's interview with Ho Wong Kok, 15 Jun 2007.

⁹⁴ Author's interview with Tan Geok Hak, 5 Oct 2006.

⁹⁵ Author's interview with Joyce Soh, 5 Apr 2007.

⁹⁶ Author's interview with Sim Kim Boey, 14 Feb 2007.

⁹⁷ Singapore, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the System of Contract Labour in Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printers, 1960), pp. 20, 47-52.

school holidays, made twenty-five cents more.⁹⁸ So did the mother and elder brother of Samuel Seetoh, as their father, who sold buns, was not doing well.⁹⁹ Angie Ng (born 1955) and her family of seven stayed in an attap house at Kim Tian Road in Si Kah Teng. To supplement the income of her father, an odd-job labourer, her mother also cleaned ships:

It was manual work like collecting rubbish from the hold of the ship and the engine room. My mother was quite small built, so usually she was sent to the engine room to clean the oil and dirt. [*Was this regular?*] As regular as they could. She was hawking at first. Then other housewives came along, saying that cleaning ships was better money.¹⁰⁰

Another woman who worked as a *long sai* for many years was Png Pong Tee (born 1927), who when she was 40 days old was adopted by a family selling attap and wood for housing in Si Kah Teng, near the sewerage works. When Png's husband passed away in the 1950s due to illness, among the various labouring jobs she took up to support her three daughters and a son, including working as a coolie to load and unload goods, was cleaning ships:

It was tough working on a ship, scraping off the rust. Sometimes the rust would get into your eyes. If your skin was broken, the salt water really stung you, and your skin might also rot. You had to work every day of the week before the ship left, because it took several days to clean, not just one day, because the ship was so big. When you had to clean the oil, your body was covered all over in black oil, that was terrible. So I had to bring clothes there to change, or else how could I go home? I earned \$2.80 a day working as a *long sai*. Initially it was \$1.80, then the pay increased.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Author's interview with Jimmy Yi, 4 Feb 2007.

⁹⁹ Author's interview with Samuel Seetoh, 27 Apr 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Author's interview with Angie Ng, 8 Feb 2007.

¹⁰¹ Author's interview with Png Pong Tee, 10 Jan 2008.

Community of the Living, the Dead and the Pigs

More so than one's economic position, urban kampong life was shaped by the character and culture of the local environment. The size of the average wooden dwelling was often constrained by the roads and the larger structures built along them, and by the presence of Ma Kau Thiong to the east, the sewerage works to the west, and to the north and south, the SIT estates at Ganges Avenue and Boon Tiong Road respectively. The larger houses of wealthier families along Beo Lane were well-ventilated and in good repair; off the roads, however, was an entirely different living environment.¹⁰² There, the odd well-maintained building was swamped by numerous small, haphazardly-built wooden houses lining narrow kampong tracks, which often had low ceilings, no windows in the bedrooms and were shared by more than one low-income, tenant family.¹⁰³ As Lee Ah Moh, born in Bukit Ho Swee in 1922, aptly described, 'Our houses – you build here, I'll build there, side by side. We built as long as there was space. All were sandwiched together. Some of the houses, their backs faced the fronts [of other houses], or the fronts faced the backs, or they faced the corners'.¹⁰⁴

In a settlement which had developed without planning, amenities were at a premium but this meant that the cost of living was low. Rubbish, clogged drains and pools of stagnant water collected in the kampong lanes, while pedestrian paths became mud tracks after heavy rains and the air turned dusty in the heat. Bukit Ho Swee had no sewers, although the sewerage works nearby served parts of the City which did have plumbing and street-side culverts. The average toilet, a wooden shed built outside the house, sometimes conveniently over a drain, utilised the 'pail' system and was cleared daily by night-soil workers. It was shared by multiple families, as was the communal bathroom, also a separate structure, to which one fetched water for bathing. Most

¹⁰² Chua Beng Huat, 'The Business of Living in Singapore', pp. 1005-6.

¹⁰³ Chua Beng Huat, 'Modernism and the Vernacular', *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 72.

¹⁰⁴ NAS, audio-visual recording titled *A Pictorial Exhibition: The Emergence Of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation To Progress*, Nov 1983.

houses did not have piped water, so people obtained water for free from wells or the City Council standpipes along the road where, after a queue, they would carry the water home in buckets, or, circumstances permitting, wash their food or laundry on the spot. Meals were cheaply cooked using wood for fuel, frequently picked from sawmills at Hong Lim Pa Sat. Wealthier households purchased a supply of generator-powered electricity, which switched off at a fixed time at night, but low-income families simply made do with kerosene or pressure lamps, and often only in the evenings.

For the residents, housing was not a top priority, ranked below the never-ending challenge of finding work. Even allowing for an omnipresent nostalgia, most kampong dwellers when reflecting on their wooden housing found little to complain and in some cases much charm. The official concern with overcrowding, lack of light and insanitation found little empathy with them. Notions of darkness and light, stuffiness and fresh air, and sanitation and dirt were conditioned by the physical environment. For many residents, living in a house made of wood with gaps between the planks was *liang* ('well-ventilated'),¹⁰⁵ although the degree of this varied according to the size and height of the house, the roofing material (zinc roofs conducted heat while some attap roofs had a sky well or a glass pane), the availability of windows, and the shade provided by overhanging trees. The lack of lighting in the house was often of little concern when the occupants' social and economic life took them outside it much of the time, when 'it was the outside, rather than the inside, which was intended to have meaning'.¹⁰⁶ Tan Ah Kok, whose family used kerosene lamps, felt that 'even when it was dark, because we were used to it, it was okay. But if you were used to living in a brightly lit home, you wouldn't want to stay in a dark house',¹⁰⁷ while Lee Soo Seong simply stated, 'Kampong lighting was not like the bright lighting in the HDB flats today – what for? It's crazy!'¹⁰⁸ Some families certainly kept their houses and surrounding areas clean; Tan Ah Kok's family and their landlord's cooperated to regularly sweep the area,¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Roxana Waterson, *The Living House: An Anthropology of Architecture in South-East Asia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 31-32.

¹⁰⁷ Author's interview with Tan Ah Kok, 22 Mar 2007.

¹⁰⁸ Author's interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

¹⁰⁹ Author's interview with Tan Ah Kok, 22 Mar 2007.

while the family of Tay Choo (born 1940), who rented part of their house to other families, rostered the tenants to wash the toilet twice a day.¹¹⁰ Others, particularly those who rented, often did not or could not do so.

The pail toilet system had long been criticised by the British medical establishment for being insanitary and disease-breeding.¹¹¹ But for its smells and the worms which multiplied freely in old waste, it was readily accepted by the residents. Those who felt uncomfortable with the accumulated filth, as Lily Wee explained, adapted one way or another:

We had a bucket toilet at one end of the house. Because it was inconvenient, we didn't go to the toilet all the time. But everyone made sure, when the night-soil man came to clear, to be the first to beat the schedule. But there were times you couldn't help it. When adults went in, they smoked to kill the smell, so once I tried with my grandmother's cigarette, and I coughed badly. [Laughs] It was more torturing than the smell, so I never did it again. So you quickly went in and quickly came out.¹¹²

The residents were more concerned to use the toilet than with its smell or dirt; when Lee Soo Seong's family moved from Beo Lane to Bukit Ho Swee [road], they shared an attap house and a wooden toilet with more than ten families, each with at least five members. A common scene in the morning was people bringing paper to squat in front of the toilet, calling for the occupant to hurry if they were urgent.¹¹³

If the pail system was tolerated by the residents, it was enthusiastically welcomed by the free-range pigs. Tan Ah Kok related, 'Our toilet was like a small house, with two planks. The waste would fall to the bottom and the pigs would eat it.

¹¹⁰ Author's interview with Tay Choo, 14 Feb 2007.

¹¹¹ Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore*, pp. 190-206.

¹¹² Author's interview with Lily Wee, 3 Jun 2007.

¹¹³ OHC, interview with Lee Soo Seong, 19 Nov 1996.



Plate 2.8: A dilapidated toilet constructed of bricks and plank in the Bukit Ho Swee area, year unknown (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 2.9: A pig waits near a toilet in the Bukit Ho Swee area, year unknown (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

Sometimes when you were doing your business, the pigs were there waiting. [Laughs] The toilet was high and the bottom was deep. If it was too low, the pigs would get in'.¹¹⁴ Pigs, really, were part of the kampong's economy and the local system of environmental sanitation. As Samuel Seetoh related about his landlord, such encounters at the toilet were sometimes due to shrewd engineering and planning:

The pig sty was built next to the toilet and they made a trapdoor for the pigs to go for the waste. [Laughs] Every time you opened the door, the pigs knew their delicacy was coming. So they put their heads there and waited. Sometimes, you took too long, the fellow snorted. It was like telling you, why you take so long?¹¹⁵

The graves of Bukit Ho Swee signified the changing attitudes of the 1950s Chinese family towards gods, ghosts and ancestors. Unlike Ma Kau Thiong, on whose western side the pigs roamed but was otherwise uninhabited,¹¹⁶ the adjoining Hokkien cemetery was closely-built over with burgeoning wooden houses, and occasionally, the torrential rains washed away the topsoil to reveal part of a coffin. 'Living people and dead people were neighbours. We didn't feel afraid', Lee Soo Seong mused, noting that under the kitchen in his house was a grave.¹¹⁷ In the crushing press of numbers into confined space, pragmatism had evidently overcome the customary Chinese deference for the deceased. Urban dwellers' living with the dead belied a new attitude towards housing location, as families moved from the low-lying Central Area to higher, burial grounds. A friend of Tay Ah Chuan staying in Si Kah Teng had a grave inside his room, over which the house was built. The family simply covered the grave with a piece of cloth and laid a mattress over it.¹¹⁸ A mutual friend, Tay Bok Chiu, who saw the grave while retrieving a marble, explained that 'the family made offerings to it on the 1st and 15th of the month. The builders didn't care, they just levelled the gravestone and paved cement over it and built the house to make money'. After the 1961 fire, Tay discovered

¹¹⁴ Author's interview with Tan Ah Kok, 22 Mar 2007.

¹¹⁵ Author's interview with Samuel Seetoh, 27 Apr 2007.

¹¹⁶ HB 842/1/52, Memo to Senior Lands Inspector, SIT, 8 Oct 1958.

¹¹⁷ OHC, interview with Lee Soo Seong, 19 Nov 1996.

¹¹⁸ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan. 13 Sep 2006.

that below his bed was a coffin with bones; he had not known previously!¹¹⁹ The house of Ong Chye Ho (born 1924), who lived near Or Kio Tau and worked in a sawmill at Beach Road, was also built over a grave. Ong wondered, ‘What was there to be afraid of? They are dead. We didn’t make offerings. The grave was below the house, so how to pray?’¹²⁰ Png Pong Tee, the ship cleaner and coolie, would sometimes reach home at night after working overtime. Although she had to walk past the graves in Si Kah Teng at night to reach her house, she also had no fear of the dead: ‘I have no grievance with the ghosts, why would they come out to catch me? If they caught someone, it was because previously they *kiam che* [‘owed the ghosts a debt’]. The ghosts would not anyhow catch people’.¹²¹

Not only were the graves tolerated, they were encroached upon as public spaces and put to practical use. Like many other children, Lee Soo Seong and his friends played at the graves of Ma Kau Thiong; at sunset, they would sit on straw mats placed over the dead and listen to the adults tell stories.¹²² Chua Beng Huat and his friends also frequently played at the cemetery. It was, Chua explained, ‘the only playground. We weren’t really playing anything other than running around and digging into holes looking for bones’.¹²³ According to Tay Ah Chuan, the coffin’s wooden boards were also used as makeshift bridges over small canals or to build pig stys; ‘it was not unusual for us’, Tay explained, ‘It was 见惯不怪’ (‘You grow accustomed to what you frequently see’).¹²⁴

As the average wooden house was small and unlit in the daytime, life often spilled into the kampong’s public spaces, among which, as, Chua observed, ‘[t]he village institution par excellence was undoubtedly the village coffeeshop’, constantly filled with men and teenagers in its fourteen-hour long operating time from eight in the morning to ten at night. As under-employment was prevalent, the coffeeshop was the

¹¹⁹ Author’s interview with Tay Bok Chiu, 24 Jan 2007.

¹²⁰ Author’s interview with Ong Chye Ho, 14 Feb 2007.

¹²¹ Author’s interview with Png Pong Tee, 10 Jan 2008.

¹²² OHC, interview with Lee Soo Seong, 19 Nov 1996.

¹²³ Author’s interview with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006.

¹²⁴ Author’s interview with Tay Ah Chuan. 13 Sep 2006.

site of ‘collective idling’: gambling, listening to popular storytellers Ong Toh or Lee Dai Soh on the Rediffusion, the cable radio service which broadcast in various Chinese languages, the elderly man reading out Chinese newspapers to his audience, or simply the ‘trading of jokes, mild put-downs, boastful self-defence and aggrandising embellishments of one’s exploits’.¹²⁵ Women, on the other hand, tended to remain within or near their homes. At home, housewives did piece work, took care of the young children, and looked after the home; if they were out, it was for groceries at the market or to bring the children to school.¹²⁶ But women also found social networks and sat and chatted with one another on benches or forecourts outside their houses in their spare time.¹²⁷

Interrupting but also reinforcing the rhythm of daily life was the periodic kampong ‘event’. This typically centred around some sort of celebration, whether of the Lunar New Year, festivals or the birthdays of gods worshipped by the Chinese. Despite many of the residents having a new relationship with the dead, traditional Chinese customs were still observed. The New Year was celebrated noisily with fire crackers and was ‘a special time’, for ‘eating chicken and aerated water were Chinese New Year items’.¹²⁸ Teochew opera performances which the wealthier villagers organised on the gods’ birthdays were so eagerly anticipated that many residents brought their stools to grab a front row seat.¹²⁹ According to Lee Soo Seong, such performances, based on stories from ancient China, were invaluable in reinforcing traditional values among low-income Chinese, particularly the home-bound and uneducated women.¹³⁰ This was particularly evident during the Mid-Autumn Festival, the occasion of a full moon.¹³¹ If the moon was obscured, Lee remembered, the children, ‘all very excited and serious’, would relive an old custom, banging on their pans, broken pails and buckets to chase off the ‘Heavenly Dog’ which had ‘swallowed’ the moon. Although ‘the whole hill would

¹²⁵ Chua Beng Huat, ‘The Business of Living in Singapore’, pp. 1008-9; author’s interviews with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006, and Tay Ah Chuan 13 Sep 2006.

¹²⁶ Author’s interview with Elizabeth Soh, 8 Feb 2007.

¹²⁷ Chua, ‘Modernism and the Vernacular’, pp. 78-79.

¹²⁸ Author’s interview with Lily Wee, 3 Jun 2007.

¹²⁹ Author’s interviews with Joyce Soh, 5 Apr 2007, and Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

¹³⁰ Author’s interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

¹³¹ The Mid-Autumn Festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month celebrates family reunion.

be very noisy’, the adults did not mind the din and ‘everyone would be happy when the Heavenly Dog had finally been chased away’.¹³²

As an important occasion for venerating one’s ancestors, the Hungry Ghosts Festival¹³³ also drew large numbers of residents (and hawkers). Like other large-scale traditional celebrations, it was organised by the wealthier residents or, what oft amounted to the same, the management board of local temples; on these occasions, as Chua Beng Huat recalled, these individuals broadcast their social status as the kampong’s elite:

The Hungry Ghosts Festival was very big. There was a platform built on the entire road and it would be covered with food. Huge amounts of paper money were burned and it burned all day. Every family brought their dishes, depending on whether they were rich or poor. We often took up a whole section of the podium because my mother was a big believer. We had a whole roasted pig, chicken, everything. At the end of the day, we kids ran about giving out food to neighbours and relatives.¹³⁴

The annual celebrations and the daily socialisation had the crucial effect of forging a sense of community and place among the residents, integrating those who recently arrived into the basic norms and dynamics of kampong life. Trust based on a personal relationship, as Lim You Meng explained, underpinned the social fabric of the kampong community:

When we were celebrating the gods’ birthdays, the temple would send an uncle to collect money from my family to hire the Teochew and Hokkien opera troupes. We gave \$1, as we were not so well-off; the rich families gave \$2. We knew this uncle well, and he could collect the money

¹³² Author’s interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006; OHC, interview with Lee Soo Seong, 19 Nov 1996.

¹³³ The Hungry Ghosts Festival on the fourteenth day of the seventh lunar month celebrates the spirits and ghosts leaving the lower world to visit the living.

¹³⁴ Author’s interview with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006.

because people knew him and trusted him. He was unemployed and an opium smoker.¹³⁵

It is important not to romanticise the way of life and the social ethic of the kampong community. As with all systems, it had its flaws and social conflict sometimes occurred at its interstices. This was clear in the case of the *hwei*, an informal system of rotating credit popular in postwar Singapore. The *hwei* was a form of self-help organised among low-income, uneducated people (except possibly the tontine head) who were either unwilling or unable to utilise bank credit, for which securities or guarantors were required. By raising a sum of money from its members, the *hwei* enabled subscribers urgently in need of cash (such as for a wedding or to start a business) to obtain it quickly, while others could invest their savings and benefit, particularly by delaying their bids, from a fairly high rate of interest.¹³⁶ The determining element in the system was mutual trust. But the *hwei* had gained a poor reputation in official circles because of cases where the head or a member had absconded with the money. Undoubtedly this had happened, and kampong dwellers ostensibly knew the risks without being deterred from joining one. Elizabeth Soh (born 1955), who stayed at the foot of Ma Kau Thiong along Havelock Road and whose grandmother was head of a *hwei*, explained that ‘usually, when people organised a *hwei*, they only let those they knew enter’.¹³⁷ The *hwei*’s success, as another resident acknowledged, was based on the integrity of the tontine head as well as the members, while only those who used the money to gamble were the high-risk ones.¹³⁸ Subscribers were seemingly aware that participating in the *hwei* was itself a gamble.¹³⁹

Without discounting its apparent failings, the *hwei* was well-suited to operating in a low-income urban kampong. The heads were typically the wealthier residents, such as shop owners or members of a temple management board who had ‘established’ their

¹³⁵ Author’s interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

¹³⁶ K. L. Koh, ‘The Legal Aspects of “Hwei” and “Koottu” in Singapore and Malaysia’, *The Malayan Law Journal*, Oct 1967, pp. xxxviii, xlii.

¹³⁷ Author’s interview with Elizabeth Soh, 8 Feb 2007.

¹³⁸ Author’s interview with James Seah, 21 Oct 2006.

¹³⁹ Author’s interview with Tan Ah Kok, 22 Mar 2007.

integrity through their daily interactions with other residents or their steady support of kampong celebrations. Lim Soo Hiang's mother, who ran Yong Kee provisions shop, headed a *hwei* and had little problem with members, who were usually their neighbours, defaulting on their subscriptions. Shopowners were, after all, familiar with this informal system of credit, since their customers often bought provisions in advance and paid for them at the end of the month when they received their pay; the customers sometimes defaulted on the loan but, being neighbours, usually paid up.¹⁴⁰ Lee Soo Seong, observing that shopowners knew many people from their day-to-day transactions, remembered 'this person named Ah Puay as he was well-liked by the villagers. People often spoke of him as a good chap and he was respected amongst the elderly. He helped to settle disputes'.¹⁴¹ Conversely, members of the *hwei*, often subsisting on low incomes from irregular work, found it tailored to living in the 'here and now': they could quickly obtain funds for an emergency or invest what little money they had at a particular moment in time to earn some sorely-needed interest. Many of the heads and members, it is important to note, were women, emphasising again the key role they played in the family economy. Samuel Seetoh's mother, the ship cleaner, joined several *hweis* to help finance her hawker husband's businesses.¹⁴²

The proximity of relatives, as social and economic pillars of support, constituted an inner circle of self-help. Goh Keng Swee's 1956 study found 'a fairly extensive' network of mutual help between relatives, with about 4% of the low-income households (a figure likely to be understated) receiving contributions from relatives staying elsewhere, amounting to a monthly average of \$51 per recipient, 'no small sum at all'.¹⁴³ The Bukit Ho Swee case is varied. Maurice Freedman found 'little clustering of kin in a geographical sense' among urban Chinese households in Singapore but his frame of reference was the more closely knit villages in China bound by common kinship.¹⁴⁴ This existed only among Bukit Ho Swee's wealthier and more established extended families, such as those of Chua Beng Huat, Lim You Meng and Roy Chan.

¹⁴⁰ Author's interview with Lim Soo Hiang, 2 Jan 2008.

¹⁴¹ Author's interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

¹⁴² Author's interview with Samuel Seetoh, 27 Apr 2007.

¹⁴³ Goh, *Urban Incomes and Housing*, p. 93.

¹⁴⁴ Maurice Freedman, *Chinese Family and Marriage in Singapore* (London: HMSO, 1957), p. 29.

Even so, the nuclear family which moved more recently into the kampong could have relatives in the same or nearby kampong or in the Central Area (where their parents might be residing). Zhou Lian Che (born 1929) lived with her husband and five children in a 2-storey, zinc-roofed private house along Havelock Road, while her mother and elder sister resided in wooden houses opposite in Bukit Ho Swee.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, according to Tay Ah Chuan, '4-5 families in the area' were his relatives.¹⁴⁶

But other kampong dwellers had few if any relatives at all with whom they were in contact. In this situation, the passing of the main breadwinner could reduce them to living on the margin. Sim Kim Boey, Wong Pok Hee and Tan Ah Kok all attest to how, in terms of social security, widows were 'one of the least protected sections of the community'.¹⁴⁷ In Goh Keng Swee's survey, widows only comprised 3% of the households but half of them were living in poverty.¹⁴⁸ With her husband and three-year-old son, Beh Poh Suan (born 1932) lived on the slopes of the hill in the year of the Bukit Ho Swee fire. On the first day of the Lunar New Year, her husband passed away. Leaving her son to the care of a neighbour during the day, she worked in a cigarette factory, making \$2.50 a day. For Beh, 'my relatives didn't care about us, my brothers only cared about themselves. They seldom came to see me'. A literal ray of light in their lives was provided by her *towkay*, who offered to install a light in her house for free, since 'you and your child are living in darkness, your husband has just passed away and you are in mourning, and you might be afraid'.¹⁴⁹

The Pai Kia and the Children

By far, it was the presence of secret societies which gave Bukit Ho Swee a notoriety as a *bo ho sor chai* ('bad place').¹⁵⁰ Comprised mainly of male kampong

¹⁴⁵ Author's interview with Zhou Lian Che, 21 Feb 2006.

¹⁴⁶ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 13 Sep 2006.

¹⁴⁷ G. J. Brocklehurst, *Report to the Government of Singapore on Social Security Measures* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1957), p. 68.

¹⁴⁸ Goh, *Urban Incomes and Housing*, p. 141.

¹⁴⁹ Author's interview with Beh Poh Suan, 14 Feb 2007.

¹⁵⁰ Author's interview with Roy Chan, 7 Mar 2007.

dwellers in their teens and twenties, the secret societies were locally embedded. They were more accurately ‘splinter groups’ from the triads which had come to Singapore from China along with the immigrants, smaller and less well-organised.¹⁵¹ Although the local secret societies continued to acknowledge the suzerainty of one of the ‘08’, ‘18’, ‘24’, ‘36’, or ‘108’ triads, for all practical purposes they operated independently. The closely-built kampong housing afforded these gangs shelter from the long arm of the law; uniformed policemen, despite the proximity of Havelock Road police station, seldom made the effort to enter Bukit Ho Swee. The gangs recruited youths who were not studying or had dropped out, and were not under the direct guidance of parents who were either working, socialising in coffeeshops or taking care of younger siblings. For instance, a youth residing in Bukit Ho Swee who joined the ‘08’ gang at the age of 15 did so because his parents did not exercise adequate supervision over him.¹⁵² Secret societies also enlisted lowly-educated young adults unable to obtain regular employment but who were seeking income and identity.

The secret societies proliferated after the war in the Central Area and in rural and urban kampongs, numbering 360 in 1954 (of which 130 were active), with 11,000 members on police rolls (6,500 active).¹⁵³ They were a harsh fact of life in the entrepot-based, pre-industrial economy, characterised by the structure of large, low-income Chinese nuclear families and the absence of official regulation in kampongs. Bukit Ho Swee was ‘one of Singapore’s well-known 黑区 (“black area” in Mandarin)’ and ‘the world of the “24”’, which faced its rival, the ‘08’, in Si Kah Teng.¹⁵⁴ From the standpoint of the secret societies, Bukit Ho Swee was not a homogenous kampong but a number of smaller ‘turfs’ with elastic social boundaries. Splinters of the ‘36’, Tiong Gi Kiam, ‘66666’ and Gi Tiong Ho, all collected *kua tau lui* (‘protection money’) from shopkeepers in Beo Lane, Bukit Ho Swee and Havelock Road.¹⁵⁵ In 1954, ‘teenager

¹⁵¹ Wilfred Blythe, *The Impact of Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya: A Historical Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 503-4.

¹⁵² Chong Moon Moi & Chai Loy, *The Social Consequences of Imprisonment: A Case Study of an Ex-prisoner*, unpublished academic exercise, Faculty of Law, University of Singapore, 1973, pp. 5-9.

¹⁵³ SPF, *Annual Report 1954*, p. 28.

¹⁵⁴ Author’s interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

¹⁵⁵ CID, *Booklet on Chinese Secret Societies in Singapore*, 1958, pp.

gangsters' were becoming active in the Ganges Avenue-Delta area.¹⁵⁶ According to a former detective, the Jalan Membina area, just below Bukit Ho Swee, had no less than eight different secret society gangs, belonging to the '08', '24' and '36'.¹⁵⁷

Again, the secret societies should not be romanticised; many were criminal organisations, although, as the police conceded, not all were truly dangerous.¹⁵⁸ As was oft-pointed out in official statements and newspapers, they committed crimes against property and the person, like robbery, kidnapping and murder. After the war, secret society members began an involvement in politics, as strikebreakers in labour disputes, participants in riots or vote-getters in elections; in the 1957 Tanjong Pagar by-election, various gangs canvassed votes for all three candidates and threatened workers of the rival parties.¹⁵⁹ The authorities claimed that secret societies lived 'entirely by intimidation' and that 'the public is inhibited from testifying against their members by fear of gang reprisals'.¹⁶⁰ Higher-income residents in the permanent housing nearby were afraid of Bukit Ho Swee's gangs; children and women were warned to avoid the kampong. Female residents at Kai Fook Mansion, a shophouse at Kim Tian Road, felt that Bukit Ho Swee 'was very complicated', and 'I dared not go' as 'my father said that I cannot go in, a lot of *samseng* there'.¹⁶¹

Nonetheless, the gangs had an entirely different working relationship with the local communities from which they had sprung. Far from fearing them, kampong dwellers accepted and at times even admired their resident *pai kia* ('bad kids').¹⁶² It is necessary, then, to unravel here the official discourse of anti-criminality prevalent in postwar Singapore. To kampong dwellers, the term 'secret society' was a misnomer, since the gangsters, if not actually known by name, were often visible in local places or

¹⁵⁶ *NYSP*, 29 Jan 1954.

¹⁵⁷ Author's interview with Harmon Singh, 25 May 2007.

¹⁵⁸ *SPF, Annual Report 1950*, p. 28.

¹⁵⁹ Singapore, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Corrupt, Illegal or Undesirable Practices at Elections* (Singapore: Printed at the Government Printing Office, 1958), pp. 13-25.

¹⁶⁰ CO 1030/765, Telegram from Governor of Singapore to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 19 Jan 1959.

¹⁶¹ Author's interviews with Bella Leong Lee Moy, 5 Oct 2006, and Alice Wong, 18 Oct 2006.

¹⁶² Referring to delinquent youth or gangsters.

activities. A secret society member could be ‘just an ordinary person, greeting people and drinking coffee’,¹⁶³ or a former primary school-mate who had dropped out or not progressed to secondary education.¹⁶⁴ Lee Soo Seong knew of a ‘twenty-something gangster named Ah Ter’, who was ‘scrawny and very refined looking’, but was highly-regarded by the locals and, being a member of the ‘36’, was able to walk freely into the turf of the ‘24’.¹⁶⁵

Bukit Ho Swee, to its dwellers, was not considered a dangerous place and a hotbed of crime and criminality. In the absence of official municipal regulation of the kampong, the local gangsters functioned as its eyes, creating what Jane Jacobs called ‘a web of public respect and trust’.¹⁶⁶ They were indispensable in policing it against crime and fire (see Chapter 4).¹⁶⁷ *Pai kia* sat in the coffeeshop daily at the Beo Lane-Bukit Ho Swee [road] junction, the kampong’s south entrance, scrutinising strangers entering the village. One outsider visiting his friends in Bukit Ho Swee discovered that ‘as I was about 18 years old, they watched me to see whether I was a secret society member. They ignored you if you were 40 or 50 years old. They also ignored the girls. But if you were in your late teens or early 20s, and you were a stranger, they would stare at you’.¹⁶⁸ Joyce Soh of the family of *twakow*-builders found the *pai kia* in Hong Lim Pa Sat ‘very righteous and 本性不坏 [‘their nature was good’]. If there were strangers or people with bad intentions who came into our kampong, they would protect us’.¹⁶⁹ The gangs also practiced self-help: ‘if someone poor had died and there was nobody to carry the coffin, you just light two white candles, and they would help’,¹⁷⁰ to ‘arrange the funeral and prepare the mourning clothes, you didn’t have to say a word’.¹⁷¹

¹⁶³ Author’s interview with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006.

¹⁶⁴ Author’s interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

¹⁶⁵ Author’s interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

¹⁶⁶ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Penguin Books, 1961), p. 67.

¹⁶⁷ Chua, ‘The Business of Living in Singapore’, p. 1008.

¹⁶⁸ Author’s interview with Han Tan Juan, 3 Feb 2007.

¹⁶⁹ Author’s interview with Joyce Soh, 5 Apr 2007.

¹⁷⁰ Author’s interview with Oh Boon Eng, 4 Apr 2007.

¹⁷¹ Author’s interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

The positive security role of the secret societies gave rise to the widely-known phenomena of kampong houses left unlocked in the day (although this was also due to the poverty which discouraged theft) and the social acceptability of locals 'walking through other people's houses, in through the front door and out at the back'.¹⁷² Kampong living, consequently, provided a strong sense of social security. When Lily Wee, as a young single woman, walked back home from Bukit Merah at night after watching Chinese opera, 'I never felt for my safety. That was the feeling of kampong life, you felt very secure in your own kampong. It must be the unwritten rules of that time'.¹⁷³ In fact, it was the police, not the gangs, with which kampong dwellers (and low-income Chinese in general) had a wary, even fearful, relationship; witnesses of a crime typically told the policeman, '*Wa m chai*' ('I don't know').¹⁷⁴

One form of secret society activity, however, did spill over into local violence: disputes over the 'turfs' which were the key source of their economic bases. Yet the residents did not feel they were personally at risk in these local conflicts. If a gangfight was planned between rival members, they might inform the residents, 'Don't come out of the house, after dinner, you lock yourselves inside'.¹⁷⁵ Some locals felt that gang fights were 'fake': 'they threw Pepsi-Cola bottles, *png, png, png*, and within five minutes, they were gone'.¹⁷⁶

Secret societies typically imposed a financial levy on the kampong's economic activities, collecting *kua tau lui* from hawkers, pirate taxis and gambling and opium dens, so grafting one form of illegality on top of another, and from legitimate businesses.¹⁷⁷ This illicit financial practice, officially labelled as 'extortion', was accepted by locals as a necessary evil but also voluntarily. As the authorities acknowledged, the gangs provided 'real protection to their subscribers from the interference of other gangs, and the majority of victims subscribe willingly as a form of

¹⁷² Author's interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007.

¹⁷³ Author's interview with Lily Wee, 3 Jun 2007.

¹⁷⁴ Author's interview with Roy Chan, 7 Mar 2007.

¹⁷⁵ Author's interview with Lily Wee, 3 Jun 2007.

¹⁷⁶ Author's interview with Madam Wong, 2 Nov 2006.

¹⁷⁷ Leon Comber, *An Introduction to Chinese Secret Societies in Malaya* (Singapore: D. Moore, 1957), pp. 42-48.

insurance and do not consider the demands extortionate'.¹⁷⁸ Chua Beng Huat, whose family ran a provisions shop, explained, 'With people like us who had business, they didn't even have to extort money. They just had to come to my father and say they needed money, and they would get the money. It was not extortion in any kind, because it could be your neighbour's son'.¹⁷⁹ Gangsters also came to Yong Kee provisions shop for protection money; Lim Soo Hiang's mother felt that 'these people were 上上下下 ('regulars') and since they were not asking for much, we just paid them off. They wouldn't create trouble for us. They would speak with us properly. Our area was still quite peaceful, not much trouble or bad people'.¹⁸⁰ However, Goh Yong Soo's father, a cloth-seller, was 'most afraid of them' and 'we were badly bullied'. Members of a gang, falsely claiming to be from different secret societies, would demand protection money repeatedly. Goh explained, 'How could you not pay them? At the most, you could postpone it'.¹⁸¹

The 'extortion' of hawkers was more exacting on this low-income earning group but was to some extent also not as severe as one might expect. Tay Bok Chiu, then a teenager, had to regularly pay one gangster while selling crabs at the Or Kio Tau market; every stall there gave 50 cents, because 'if you didn't, he would find trouble with you'.¹⁸² When Wang Ah Tee's father sold *rojak* during the gods' birthday celebrations, he also had to pay *kua tau lui*.¹⁸³ But other hawkers, such as Lee Ah Gar and his father, both itinerant peddlers, managed to avoid the practice, there being 'no such thing that I heard of'.¹⁸⁴ Samuel Seetoh of the hawking family in Si Kah Teng, by claiming kinship with an influential Seetoh family in the area, found that 'the secret societies did not disturb us but in certain celebrations, they still collected money but not every month. They gave us some leeway'.¹⁸⁵ When the gangsters came to him, Tan Nam Sia (born 1945), who ran a roadside noodle stall at the Or Kio Tau market, simply told them, 'I

¹⁷⁸ SPF, *Annual Report 1954*, p. 29.

¹⁷⁹ Author's interview with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006.

¹⁸⁰ Author's interview with Lim Soo Hiang, 2 Jan 2008.

¹⁸¹ Author's interview with Goh Yong Soo, 25 Jul 2007.

¹⁸² Author's interview with Tay Bok Chiu, 24 Jan 2007.

¹⁸³ Author's interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007.

¹⁸⁴ Author's interview with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006.

¹⁸⁵ Author's interview with Samuel Seetoh, 27 Apr 2007.

have no business'. His mother later discussed the matter with the gangsters, after which 'they didn't come anymore. They understood my business did not make a lot of money'.¹⁸⁶

The secret societies were, in fact, a microcosm of an important aspect of the urban kampong community. The work-shy *pai kia*, who contributed little to their families through legitimate work, were socially valued for their role as the community's guardians. The protection rendered was, however, for a fundamentally pragmatic purpose, for the kampong was the source of the gangs' finance, manpower and shelter. Tay Bok Chiu commented aptly on the similarity of the dog eat dog nature of the underworld and the dark side of the urban kampong:

In those days, if you could take advantage, you took advantage; if you could bully, you bullied. If you didn't know more powerful people, you were always bullied. It was almost lawless, like *bo cheng hu* ('there was no government').¹⁸⁷

A similar single-minded pragmatism pervaded the larger community within which secret societies were embedded. Bukit Ho Swee was not a community which, like rural villages, stood outside the magnetic pull of city life. It was, rather, an *urban* kampong, developed in response to social deprivation and founded and built primarily on practical self-interest. The community, consequently, was transient in nature, underlaid frequently by a chronic tension among the low-income Chinese residents who had found a place to make a living but were constantly, for themselves and their families, looking outward and upward, even if they were unsure how this transition might be accomplished. Subtenants, it appeared, were less integrated socially into the kampong than the established families, while a social distance also existed between the richer and poorer residents.¹⁸⁸ The pragmatism in seeking good fortune was

¹⁸⁶ Author's interview with Tan Nam Sia, 3 May 2007.

¹⁸⁷ Author's interview with Tay Bok Chiu, 24 Jan 2007.

¹⁸⁸ According to Iain Buchanan in his survey of Geylang Lorong 17. Iain Buchanan, 'The Squatter Slum, Its Growth and Clearance', *Architecture 17* n, 1966/67, pp. 111, 114.

underscored by the prevalence of the *hwei* as well as the illicit *chap ji ki*, the twelve-digit lottery, which was ‘as popular as ever’ with large sections of the public, due to the widespread desire to ‘win money by chance’.¹⁸⁹ If they found their wooden houses agreeable dwellings, that did not prevent the dwellers from both admiring and desiring more permanent housing; many would have agreed with Wang Ah Tee’s view of the newly-built SIT flats at Boon Tiong Road at the foot of Ma Kau Thiong: ‘if you stayed in that kind of house, it was considered顶呱呱 (“very good”)’.¹⁹⁰

The children of Bukit Ho Swee stood awkwardly between this kampong community and the progress many of their parents sought. Large families forged a new mobility among low-income Chinese, compelling them to leave the Central Area. On the other hand, the presence of children, as we have seen, reinforced a sense of community: socially, through their participation in the kampong’s celebrations and the activities of the secret societies and, economically, by hawking or getting involved in other forms of irregular work on behalf of the household.

The term ‘children’ was often a misnomer except in the strict sense of age. The typical kampong child appropriated early both the roles of adult and child and could be, as Arlette Farge observed in eighteenth century Paris, ‘rascals and pranksters and responsible persons’. Consequently, social and spatial ‘movement’, both in physical and socio-economic terms, characterised the life of kampong children, vacillating between ‘childhood and adult life, dependence and autonomy, economic responsibility and unbridled mischief’.¹⁹¹ As Chua Beng Huat recalled of his childhood, adults and boys gambled together in the coffeeshops, as ‘there wasn’t much differentiation of adults and children. By the time you were twelve or thirteen years old, no longer going to school and hanging out in these places, the adults didn’t treat you as kids. They would gamble with you no matter what age you were, as long as you had money’.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ SPF, *Annual Report 1950*, p. 18.

¹⁹⁰ Author’s interviews with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007, and with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006.

¹⁹¹ Arlette Farge, *Fragile Lives: Violence, Power and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 65.

¹⁹² Author’s interview with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006.



Plate 2.10: Young men at the MCA shophouse, c. 1950s. Wong Pok Hee is in white shorts (Courtesy of Wong Pok Hee).



Plate 2.11: Young men outside a provisions shop at the MCA shophouse, c. 1950s (Courtesy of Wong Pok Hee).

Education offered a way out of the community and the possibility of different life chances. As part of the postwar expansion of education in Singapore, many of Bukit Ho Swee's children were attending primary school, usually in the vicinity. There was, in the 1950s, a growing desire among parents to send their children to English-medium rather than vernacular schools.¹⁹³ In the kampong, an increasing minority of parents, recognising the social importance of the language of their colonial masters, were enrolling some of their children in English-medium schools like Havelock and Tiong Bahru primary schools, a clear indication of their pragmatic pursuit of progress.¹⁹⁴ But, there appeared to be some arbitrariness and uncertainty in this: the parents of Lim Soo Hiang, for instance, sent her and three of her siblings to English-medium schools but two others to Chinese-medium schools.¹⁹⁵ The majority of children, however, still attended Chinese-medium and -financed primary schools which stood largely outside official control and sources of funding: for example, Kai Kok Public School in Bukit Ho Swee and Chuen Min Public School at Tiong Bahru Road, both of which were run by Chinese businessmen living in Bukit Ho Swee or the vicinity,¹⁹⁶ and the Chinese Industrial and Commercial School along Outram Road. In 1960, there were 490 boys and 317 girls studying at Kai Kok and 425 boys and 318 girls at Chuen Min.¹⁹⁷

Not many graduated, though, from the primary schools and even fewer continued into secondary education; those who did often went to the nearby Chinese-medium Chung Cheng High School (Branch) at Kim Yam Road. In 1952, only 7.8% of all students in Chinese-medium schools were enrolled in secondary education. This was a striking difference from English-medium education, where parents appeared determined to keep their children in school.¹⁹⁸ In many cases in Bukit Ho Swee, both parent and child ranked education low among their priorities, since it did not guarantee regular employment. A Chinese secondary education in particular left one with no prospect of an 'iron rice bowl' in the English-medium civil service. 'We didn't value

¹⁹³ DOE, *Annual Report 1950*, p. 55; Singapore, *First Educational Triennial Survey 1955-57*, p. 17.

¹⁹⁴ Chua Beng Huat, 'The Business of Living in Singapore', p. 1007.

¹⁹⁵ Author's interview with Lim Soo Hiang, 2 Jan 2008.

¹⁹⁶ ME 2421/57, List of Management Committee Members of Chuen Min Public School, 4 Jul 1957; ME 2481/57, List of Management Committee Members of Kai Kok Public School, 21 Jan 1958.

¹⁹⁷ ME 913/57, Inspection Report, 19 May 1960; ME 943/57, Inspection Report, 22 Jul 1960.

¹⁹⁸ DOE, *Annual Report 1952*, pp. 18, 34.

education’, Tay Bok Chiu explained, ‘What was most important was to make a living and make money’.¹⁹⁹ Girls and the older children, moreover, were likely to be withdrawn from school by their parents to work and support the family. Under Chinese custom, females were not regarded as breadwinners or as part of the family upon marriage. While it increased throughout the 1950s, the proportion of girls attending Chinese schools in Singapore was still only 40% in 1957.²⁰⁰

Work lured children away from schools to various job sites of the kampong’s shadow economy – to streets and houses as hawkers and to factories, shops and warehouses as daily- or piece-rated workers. Wang Ah Tee and his friends literally dug for coins, nails and other scrap metal from the nearby incinerator to sell to the *karang guni* collector.²⁰¹ While her parents and elder brother sold *rojak* and *kway* door to door among the neighbouring wooden houses, Tay Yan Woon earned a dollar plus a day in the Beo Lane warehouse, sorting coffee beans with many other children:

I was very young. We sat on the floor sorting coffee beans. People went to sort coffee beans when they were very young. We started work at 7-8 am and finished at 8-9 pm. Children who were in school went to the factory after class. There were males and females, mostly children. They gave you a bag of coffee beans, and the whole family would go through that bag. When you finished one bag, they gave you a new one. The more bags you sorted, the more money you earned. [*Did you get more pay for working at night?*] No, they paid you by bag. One bag about \$3. [*Did you work on weekends?*] The factory was open everyday.²⁰²

Other forms of children’s work occurred within the home or for the home-centred economy. Girls shouldered much of this unpaid responsibility: taking care of the family’s pigs, poultry and vegetables, looking after smaller children (either one’s

¹⁹⁹ Author’s interview with Tay Bok Chiu, 24 Jan 2007.

²⁰⁰ Singapore, *Annual Report 1957*, p. 141.

²⁰¹ Author’s interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007.

²⁰² Author’s interview with Tay Yan Woon, 28 Sep 2006.

siblings or children who were baby-sat), cleaning the house, and washing or sewing clothes. A resident of Kampong Silat, Agnes Ho, born in 1939 and the eldest child in the family, ended her primary education when her mother began working as an *amah* for a European doctor near the General Hospital. Besides taking care of her younger sister, Ho's chief daily task was to collect water from a public tap about twenty metres away.

I started with two small pails, then they got bigger. Then I used bamboo poles to carry the two kerosene tins of water. So one day, seven times, that was fourteen tins. People put their pails down at the taps overnight [to reserve their spot]. But still, in the day, they would quarrel and kick each other's pails. I decided to collect the water at 6 or 7 at night when there was nobody. In the day also, my younger sister, she was going to be two and learning to walk, was always behind me but she wanted to follow me. So at night was better because she slept quite early.²⁰³

But such arduous work and school did not occupy all children. Even working children, due to the irregular nature of their employment, had time on their hands, as did school-goers, who often cast aside their schoolbags once they were home and went out to play. As most children walked to and from school, the journey was frequently more interesting for them than their classes, navigating the shortcuts off the main roads and admiring the 'scenery' along the way. Lily Wee, who walked from Si Kah Teng to Cantonment Primary School in 'Big Town', took short cuts, where 'it was very enjoyable. If we saw something nice on the way, we would take a look. We would dilly dally because there was no hurry to go home, because once you went home, you took your lunch and the whole afternoon, until dinner time, you didn't know what to do'.²⁰⁴ An important effect of this 'meandering' was to raise children's awareness of local spaces and help integrate them into the wider neighbouring community.

²⁰³ Author's interview with Agnes Ho, 24 Sep 2006.

²⁰⁴ Author's interview with Lily Wee, 3 Mar 2007.

Children's social activities and games similarly tied them to the kampong community. Many children whose energies were immediately not needed for household labour, particularly the boys, spent their free time outside the house, running about topless and barefoot with their siblings, neighbours and friends. Playing children had fun with games like 'hide and seek' and 'police and thief' in the open spaces (including atop Mau Kau Thiong), and with marbles, tops, game cards, hopscotch, fighting fish and spiders, rain water (when heavy rains flooded the kampong), climbing trees, flying kites, and hunting fishes and tadpoles in a nearby *longkang* ('drain'). In their play, they often replicated the social life of their fathers, out of home and within the community. Young girls, who sometimes played with the boys but frequently remained at home with their toys and games, grew into the domestic role and responsibility of their mothers as home-makers and home-workers. Parents invariably had little time nor inclination to focus their young on school, house or paid work; this reflected their ambivalence towards the future prospects of their children, who represented their 'hope for life' but were trapped in a harsh and seemingly unalterable environment.²⁰⁵ As Tan Tiam Ho surmised, 'For our parents, having a child was just like not having a child, whether you were back or not, whether you had eaten or not. We were allowed to go about and run about freely'.²⁰⁶ Kampong kids consequently grew up in a world of freedom with only limited authority to curtail their imaginations.

This lack of control produced self-invention among the children. Their games were not pure play but both child-like and adult and involved gaming and gambling (or at least, competition). One game involved slicing through a banana with a knife to see who could create the 'cliffhanger' without severing it.²⁰⁷ Yet another was to grind light bulbs with a hammer into fine glass to coat the strings of 'battle kites'; the kids knew that the glass had to be fine or the kite would be too heavy.²⁰⁸ Children made slingshots with wooden sticks or used fruit seeds or '*tikam tikam*' to build a game of chance made with a wooden board, nails, rubber bands, and magazine pictures, which would allow

²⁰⁵ Farge, *Fragile Lives*, p. 52.

²⁰⁶ Author's interview with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007.

²⁰⁷ Author's interview with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006.

²⁰⁸ Author's interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

them to make some money.²⁰⁹ Simple guessing games enabled the young ones to grapple with the element of chance as adults did in their gambling: opening a book and guessing the page number or grabbing a handful of rice or matches and guessing whether the total number was odd or even.²¹⁰ Ong Boon Eng, in comparing the children of yesterday and the present, observed,

Even during that time, we played with fire – firecrackers, carried lanterns – like nobody’s business. No interference from our parents, unlike the parents now, who would stop the kid from doing this or that. It was ‘free concept’, the brain was free. We were more capable, more daring.²¹¹

The community of Kampong Bukit Ho Swee in the 1950s was outwardly compact but inwardly socially unstable. It was, as Joel Kahn observed of Malay kampongs in Malaya and Singapore, a developing community ‘in a process of becoming’ rather than one fixed in time and space.²¹² Economically, the Bukit Ho Swee population was divided between residents who were tied to the Central Area and those who, to a large extent, did their productive work locally. The lack of regular employment gave rise to singular ways of life which were kampong-bound: the shared housing and amenities, the coffeeshop idling, the *hweis*, and the secret societies. The local sense of community was, however, balanced by the adults’ unceasing search for material improvement, be it by having more family members work or attain higher education, or by duelling with chance through gambling. In social and economic terms, then, Bukit Ho Swee was partly autonomous and partly urbanised. In one sense though, the kampong was still independent: its ways of life had emerged without official regulation and were frequently outside the law.

²⁰⁹ Author’s interview with James Seah, 21 Oct 2006.

²¹⁰ Author’s interview with Tay Ah Chuan and Lim Yock Eng, 21 Feb 2006.

²¹¹ Author’s interview with Oh Boon Eng, 4 Apr 2007.

²¹² Joel S. Kahn, *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), p. 64.

Chapter 3

A Roar from the Oppressed People

‘Bukit Ho Swee was not on our radar screen’, according to a pioneer architect of the Housing and Development Board, when it first embarked on the public housing project in 1960.¹ This statement, however, belies an earlier history of state efforts to regulate unauthorised wooden housing in the locality west of the Singapore River. This chapter examines two sides of a growing urban conflict in the 1950s: the housing policies of the colonial state on the one hand and the contestation, both spontaneous and organised, they provoked among kampong dwellers on the other. In its pursuit of a modern, rejuvenated colonial state, the British regime sought to impose control on the fluid kampong spaces and to restore the social and political margin which had emerged at the urban periphery. The authorities created a powerful controlling discourse of clearance, depicting urban kampongs as insanitary and dangerous places belonging to ‘Old Singapore’.

This discourse underpinned the policy efforts of three branches of the colonial civil administration to either clean up or demolish unauthorised wooden housing and resettle their dwellers in government-regulated houses. The City Council, which replaced the Municipal Commission in 1951,² was an experiment in elected local government which became a more representative body in the course of the decade. It was responsible for approving building plans, surveying and controlling dwellings, sanitising kampongs, fire-fighting, and providing modern social amenities and infrastructure in the urban area.³ On the other hand, the Singapore Improvement Trust, established in 1927 mainly to carry out improvement

¹ Author’s interview with Alan Choe, 27 Nov 2006.

² In 1951, Singapore was upgraded to the status of a City.

³ Initially, in 1952, the eighteen elected and six appointed City Councillors managed six urban wards of the City of Singapore, with three elected Councillors taking charge of a ward. Of the small number of 44,896 electors registered for the 1952 elections, only half (22,475) voted. The first Chairman of the City Council was T. P. F. McNeice, a leading and experienced social service administrator. McNeice was in 1946 the President (later Secretary) of the Singapore Social Welfare Council, a body appointed by the Governor to advise the government and the Department of Social Welfare on the coordination and development of social welfare services in Singapore, and in 1949 the Chairman of the SIT. In 1957, the Council became a fully-elected body of 32 representatives, with a Mayor elected from amongst them annually.

schemes like building backlanes and controlling insanitary buildings in the Central Area, had become the defacto housing authority of the colonial government after the war. Finally, the SIT and the Land Office managed the use of vacant Trust and Crown lands, issuing, respectively, Temporary Occupation Licences (TOLs) and tenancy permits to wooden house owners for short-term periods of occupation.

However, as this chapter also discusses, British colonial attempts to contain or clear the urban kampongs and relocate the residents in regulated housing were powerfully contested. Rehousing became a major political issue in a period of fervent anti-colonialism, underlining the limits of what a colonial power could or could not make a sovereign people do.⁴ Kampong dwellers in Singapore, and in Bukit Ho Swee specifically, challenged the demolition of their wooden houses and involuntary rehousing. They contributed significantly to the growth of an anti-colonial politics which challenged the work of the City Council and the SIT's building and clearance projects in the late 1950s. Leftwing rural activists, aligned with the People's Action Party and working with politicians and the local old boys' associations, organised the residents of Bukit Ho Swee and elsewhere to redefine the basis and premises of official controls.

Transforming 'Old Singapore'

The end of World War Two witnessed the advent of major social projects in Singapore undertaken by the returning colonial regime. While retiring quickly from India and Burma, the British were determined to retain control over Malaya and Singapore for at least a generation. Postwar British policy towards its Southeast Asian colonies envisaged, as Nicholas Tarling observed, a substantial reform of society in order to establish politically stable and economically viable nation-states.⁵ Upon the formation of an anti-communist alliance representing the three main ethnic

⁴ In constitutional terms, the 1955 elections for 25 seats in the Legislative Assembly represented a watershed in Singapore politics and heralded a swing towards leftwing politics. The conservative parties which had dominated the previous elections in 1948 and 1951, the Progressive Party and the Democratic Party, were eclipsed by the PAP and the left-of-centre Singapore Labour Front. The latter won ten seats in the elections and formed a minority coalition government with the Alliance party (with three seats), with David Marshall becoming the first Chief Minister of Singapore.

⁵ Nicholas Tarling, *The Fall of Imperial Britain in South-east Asia* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 157, 170, 173.

groups, Britain accelerated Malaya's progress towards independence and granted it in 1957. Singapore, however, remained strategically valuable as a military base and entrepot port; it was separated from the peninsula in 1946 and its subsequent political developments were divorced from those north of the causeway. The British in Singapore were consequently not affected by any immediate timeline for political withdrawal. Their social programmes were so ambitious and vigorous that they merit the term 'new imperialism', even if many of them were not fully realised. Social restructuring on a large scale, like political change, sought to achieve the twin colonial aims of establishing viable nation-states and safeguarding Britain's strategic and economic interests. As Tim Harper notes, postwar British power in Malaya and Singapore attempted to foster among the people a sense of direct allegiance to the state and was motivated by powerful societal concerns about social disorder, criminality, youth delinquency, and the proletarianisation of the working class.⁶

British social policy in Singapore sought to 'rationally' reconstitute urban spaces according to a 'high modernist' philosophy. The official aim was to control the increasingly fluid spaces located at the margins of the City and rehouse the families dwelling there in regulated housing, in order to ensure that a population which had recently become mobile would be able to find accommodation only on the terms of the state. In seeking to bring local society within the direct sphere of official control, British social policy was publicly framed and articulated as a basic response to crises. While there were clearly serious social problems at the time, it is important to realise that this 'language of emergency' obscured the more ambitious and aggressive intent that lay behind its 'hidden transcripts'.⁷ In attempting to bring the dwellers of semi-autonomous kampongs under direct control, the colonial establishment represented the settlements as 'dangerous', 'insanitary' or 'criminal', inimical to the modernist vision, and evoked in the public eye a clear sense of the scale and urgency of the problem to be tackled. The premeditated social policy, in short, preceded the 'crises' it was meant to resolve. The lower rungs of Chinese society bore the brunt of this emergency campaign of social reform. Governor Henry

⁶ T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 55-75.

⁷ James C Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

Gurney in 1948 viewed the locally-born, non-English speaking Chinese of the first generation, whose fathers were immigrants, as a menace to peace, who

have as little in common with other Malayan communities as their fathers have. Their numbers are expanding in labour forces and squatter settlements....They are hardy and prolific, and nothing can be done to convert them into Malayan citizens. Their outlook is entirely Chinese, and it must be remembered that an effect of the Japanese occupation has been to settle many of them on the land from which it is difficult to dislodge them. These squatter areas are Chinese colonies in Malaya, equipped with Chinese schools which intensify their Chinese outlook and riddled with Chinese secret societies.⁸

The description was of Malaya but it could just as aptly apply to postwar Singapore and Bukit Ho Swee.

British social policy held the pathological premise that Singapore's social ills were deeply rooted in the population. Louis Chevalier had observed how middle-class Parisians in the first half of the nineteenth century perceived crime not to be the province of professional criminals 'but something ordinary and genuinely social'.⁹ In Singapore, the Social Welfare Department was established in 1946 by the colonial government to coordinate social services hitherto provided by church-based and voluntary organisations. Its work, which aimed at extending the reach of colonial social policy into local society, was well ahead of other social welfare programmes in Southeast Asia by 1949.¹⁰ But colonial administrators openly bemoaned the shortage of Chinese-speaking officials in the bureaucracy after the

⁸ CO 537/3758, Enclosure 'Groups in the Chinese Community in Malaya', in letter from Sir H. Gurney to Sir T. Lloyd, 8 Oct 1948.

⁹ Louis Chevalier, *Working Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, H. Fertig, 1973), p. 77.

¹⁰ Virginia Thompson & Richard Adloff, 'Social Welfare in Southeast Asia', *Far Eastern Survey*, 18 (12), 15 Jun 1949, p. 139.

war and acknowledged the ‘difficulty of knowing what the ordinary Chinese man or woman is thinking’.¹¹ The SWD consequently conflated Chinese youth with crime:

A result of the introduction of Japanese ‘co-prosperity’ to Singapore was the result of corruption and venality as part of everyday life....The effect on the youth of the Colony was deplorable. The current dislocation of family life and the closing of schools made matters worse still. Boys and girls became street-loiterers, pickpockets, thieves, burglars, and gangsters.¹²

The clearance of ‘squatters’ and other socially undesirable types, an important component prefigured in the British mindset and social policy, was perceived as an essentially Chinese problem; Malays were considered ‘more amenable...to resettlement and more willing to come to agreement with the landowners who wish to develop the land they occupy’.¹³ The colonial government viewed the growing belt of unauthorised housing on the urban periphery of the city as a dangerously enlarging margin, a liminal site where their control was weakest and any change, as Mary Douglas argued, could profoundly alter ‘the shape of fundamental experience’.¹⁴ The nameless and faceless urban kampong dwellers moving into unauthorised housing and living semi-autonomous and frequently illicit ways of life became, in the official mind, the City’s ‘dangerous classes’.¹⁵ Placing the urban kampongs under direct government authority consequently became a primary task in forging a modern postwar colonial image of Singapore.

Prewar Bukit Ho Swee had already been, in a small way, the site of an earlier contestation between the colonial state and unauthorised housing builders. In 1938,

¹¹ CO 537/3758, Memo by T. P. F. McNeice, G. C. S. Adkins & G. W. Webb, in letter from Sir F. Gimson to Sir T. Lloyd, 8 Dec 1948. Adkins was the Secretary for Chinese Affairs in the Singapore administration.

¹² SWD, *Annual Report 1946*, p. 30.

¹³ SIT 808/50, Paper titled ‘Resettlement’, by Commissioner of Lands and Acting Secretary for Social Welfare, 16 Jul 1952. The paper cites the case of a private developer seeking to redevelop its lands in Kampong Chantek, where almost all the Malays offered resettlement on an alternative site accepted it while almost all the Chinese dwellers rejected it for cash compensation.

¹⁴ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 150.

¹⁵ Chevalier, *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes*; Loh Kah Seng, ‘Black Areas: The Urban Kampongs and Power Relations in Postwar Singapore Historiography’, *SOJOURN*, 22 (1), April 2007, p. 21.

Yeo Tiong, staying at 41 Bukit Ho Swee, grew vegetables on a small plot of Municipal land nearby. The authorities charged that he had built a wooden house there and used it as an opium den and living quarters. They instructed Yeo to remove it, since the area had previously been cleaned up and ‘a reversion to past insanitary conditions is not desirable’. Although Yeo protested that the dwelling was only for him to ‘take rain and shelter from rain and sun while working in my field’, it was demolished.¹⁶ Obviously, the contest was one-sided and a harbinger of what was to follow in the postwar years.

Representations

In the aftermath of World War Two, official statements on unauthorised wooden housing in Singapore were framed within a discourse of control, demolition and rehousing. This ‘language of emergency’, as Greg Clancey observes, was much utilised by postwar planners who sought to mobilise households and integrate them into the social structure of the nation-state.¹⁷ In the language and framework of this discourse, urban kampongs and their dwellers were always spoken of in the collective sense, never individually, and rendered as objects – the reified others – which one could objectively appraise and consequently act punitively against.¹⁸ The kampongs and their wooden houses were labelled the ‘Black Belt’ of the City,¹⁹ while the generic phrase ‘attap hut’, which ignored the varied quality of the dwellings and roofing material, signified the wooden house as a ‘primitive’ or pre-modern housing form. Another powerful associated term commonly used by the government, ‘squatter’, alleged illegal encroachment on property hindering the march of ‘progress’. This attitude and approach ignored the patent fact that private landowners in Singapore customarily leased out land not required for development on a monthly basis, while the Land Office and SIT issued, respectively, TOLs and

¹⁶ SIT 378/38, Letter from Yeo Tiong to Municipal Secretary, 30 Mar 1938; and Memo to Manager, SIT, 4 June 1938.

¹⁷ Gregory K. Clancey, ‘Towards A Spatial History of Emergency: Notes from Singapore’, in R. Bishop, J. Phillips & W. W. Yeo (eds), *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 53.

¹⁸ Albert Memmi, *The Coloniser and the Colonised* (London: Earthscan, 2003), p. 129.

¹⁹ SIT, *Annual Report 1954*, p. 14. Other labels were “shack towns” or “shanty towns”. Singapore, *Report of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1956), p. 7; SIT 1218/53, Paper on Housing Surveys for United Nations Organisation by J. M. Fraser, 1953, p. 19.

tenancy permits for short-term occupation of Crown and Trust land, for fear that vacant lots would tempt trespassers and rubbish dumpers.²⁰ As J. M. Fraser, Manager of the SIT, was himself aware, ‘a large proportion of the squatters in the town area are not squatters in the true sense of the word but are people working in town who have found it impossible to secure housing accommodation and have either built a hut or rented accommodation in an existing hut in some place not too far from their place of work’.²¹ George Pepler, appointed Planning Adviser to the government in 1950, acknowledged that ‘the question of legality [of the ‘squatters’] has little relevance since it is bound to take second place to humanity. Squatting will not be stopped until housing accommodation is provided for all the inhabitants of Singapore’.²²

The term’s legality was only seriously challenged on one occasion. The Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party of 1955, appointed to inquire into the ‘squatter problem’, rejected the term as ‘most unsatisfactory’,²³ since it had been ‘a long established custom in Singapore for owners of land not required for immediate development to rent out plots on a month to month basis and for the tenant to erect thereon a house’.²⁴ The dwellers, the Working Party maintained, were more accurately tenants who had resided on the land and paid rent to the landowner.²⁵ But although the Working Party suggested to replace the term ‘squatter’ with ‘attap dweller’,²⁶ it continued to circulate widely in official circles in both the colonial and postcolonial periods.

The British government, in considering the expansion of public housing in Singapore after the war, strongly preferred prefabricated concrete houses, which were gaining in popularity in Britain and the United States, over wooden dwellings. It was felt in Singapore that wooden houses were ‘temporary expedients of a very

²⁰ SIT, *Annual Report 1955*, p. 31. In 1952, the Land Office issued more than 7,000 TOLs, largely for agricultural holdings but also 2,323 TOLs for flats.

²¹ SIT 952/50, Comments on Memo Submitted by Commissioner of Lands on the Problem of Squatters on Crown Land by Manager, SIT, 13 Nov 1950.

²² SIT 952/50, Note titled ‘Urban Squatters’ by George Pepler, 5 Jan 1951.

²³ HB 722/55, Notes of Seventh Meeting, 11 Nov 1955.

²⁴ Singapore, *Report of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party*, pp. 2, 3.

²⁵ HB 722/55, Interim Report of the Working Party formed to Consider a Report on the ‘Squatter Problem’, undated, c. 1955.

²⁶ HB 722/55, Notes of First Meeting, 15 Sep 1955.

poor quality', 'vulnerable to insects and disease and weather and not easy to keep clean, so that disease among people in such buildings, crowded as they will be, is more than a possibility if the period of occupation is lengthy'. The British also wanted to 'scatter' the population in self-contained communities all over Singapore, close to industries where they would work.²⁷

The representation of wooden house dwellers as inert 'squatters' obstructing the path of progress contributed to a controlling official discourse of clearance, relocation and resettlement. This was a powerful language through which the often-involuntary process of removing people from not only a type of housing but also a home, and a unique social and economic way of life, could be justified as not only desirable but indeed necessary. However, 'clearance', the officially-sanctioned term in relation to the removal of 'squatters', meant to many wooden house dwellers something altogether different. While there were admittedly mixed responses among the Chinese towards moving into modern housing, the Hokkien word for 'clearance' in the postwar period was *gua*, which had the stronger meaning of 'being chased out of' or 'evicted'.

The first official discussion of unauthorised wooden housing was undertaken by the 1947 Housing Committee, tasked to prepare a preliminary building plan to relieve the housing shortage.²⁸ Writing in the characteristic 'language of emergency', the Committee likened housing in Singapore to a dangerous social contagion: 'The disease from which Singapore is suffering is Gigantism', out of which '[a] chaotic and unwieldy megalopolis has been created' by 'haphazard and unplanned growth', while '[s]hops, residences and factories are huddled together with patches of undeveloped land' and '[n]o provision is made for road improvement, open spaces or public buildings or amenities'. This pell mell urbanisation and resultant slums, the Committee warned, were 'detrimental to health and morals'.²⁹ Such language was not disinterested description but contained, in Ranajit Guha's words, the 'voice of

²⁷ CO 825/47/15, Memo by O. W. Gilmour titled 'Postwar Housing in Singapore', 3 Nov 1944; and Memo by O. W. Gilmour titled 'Postwar Housing in Singapore: Suggestions for Meeting the Housing Difficulty', 1 Aug 1944. Gilmour was Deputy Municipal Engineer before the war.

²⁸ Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee* (Singapore: Government Printing House, 1947), p. 3.

²⁹ Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee*, p. 11.

committed colonialism’,³⁰ which supported the clearance programme. The SIT was then preparing to build new flats in Tiong Bahru and displace 2,000 kampong dwellers living there. J. M. Fraser, a member of the Committee, stated that the vacant land there could be fully developed within three years and underscored the need to acquire more land for such housing at once.³¹

The Committee’s report, when discussing wooden housing in the urban area, transformed the metaphorical contagion into a real one. It declared the ‘insanitary kampongs’ to be ‘the worst type of slum’, with ‘living conditions which are not fit for animals to live in’ and ‘no proper means of drainage and sanitation’. The problem, the report warned, affected not only the occupants but was also a threat to the whole city, and consequently, ‘[t]he only solution to this problem is demolition and re-housing’.³² This was manifestly an instance of the ‘poetics of transgression’, signifying the urban kampong as primitive and contaminated as opposed to civilised and clean.³³ The kampongs were also perceived as dangerous places, where, according to Gareth Stedman Jones, the ‘outcast’ or ‘residuum’ of society dwelled.³⁴ The Committee’s Chairman, C. W. A. Sennett, the Commissioner of Lands, viewed the slums as ‘the nurseries of a C3 nation and schools for training youth for crime’. Someone could visit, he added, ‘if he likes to risk his personal safety, such unauthorised kampongs of attap huts as have sprung up in places such as Kampong Silat or Henderson Road’.³⁵

The report was accompanied by sensational photographs of Covent Garden and Tiong Bahru, highlighting the contaminated physical environment – the poor, deteriorating state of wooden dwellings and toilets, rubbish littered around the houses, stagnant river and drain water, dark interiors, and free-roaming pigs – but no

³⁰ Ranajit Guha, ‘The Prose of Counter-Insurgency’, in Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley & Sherry B. Ortner (eds), *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 346.

³¹ SIT 475/47, Minutes of Meeting of the Housing Committee on 20 Jun 1947.

³² Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee*, pp. 6, 11.

³³ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 130-132.

³⁴ Stedman Gareth Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 11.

³⁵ SIT 475/47, Notes for Discussion on Housing by Commissioner of Lands, 13 Jun 1947. ‘C3’ was a rating in the British classification of medical fitness for military service during World War One and referred to someone unfit for combat duty. The term was subsequently extended to populations and nations.

sign of the social or economic life. Contrasted with these images were brightly-lit pictures of neatly-aligned new SIT housing.³⁶ Human activity in the kampongs was conspicuously absent, but not animal life, given the strong official desire to highlight how ‘pigs and poultry roamed the area and in many cases shared the huts with the inhabitants’.³⁷ The visual juxtaposition of the official photographs, highlighting the clean and unclean and, by association, the moral and immoral, demonstrates Susan Sontag’s contention that ‘photographing something became a routine part of the procedure for altering it’.³⁸

A local contractor, who regarded brick and concrete housing as uneconomical, had stated that prefabricated attap houses, which could last 10-20 years and were arousing interest in Kuala Lumpur, would be much cheaper.³⁹ Nevertheless, the Housing Committee, which sought ‘a City having foundations’, wanted to quickly focus on ‘planned permanent housing’, since temporary housing would ‘positively tend to create more slums in the city and extend their existence over a further period of 10 or 20 years’.⁴⁰ J. M. Fraser, in particular, favoured semi-permanent prefabricated dwellings made of reinforced concrete, which could last 50 years and of which the SIT had constructed 200 units at Balestier Estate; these modern houses, he maintained, would ‘provide a valuable unit in the construction of complete communities’.⁴¹

Besides endorsing permanent over temporary housing for the short-term three-year building programme, the Committee underlined the importance of long-term planning over the next twenty years. It called on the SIT to take on greater planning and building responsibilities and for the state to provide adequate funds for housing. A key proposal here was to shift the Central Area population into new homes. C. W. A. Sennett argued for the Trust to be vested with ‘proper zoning powers and powers to plan ahead of development, and to disperse population by

³⁶ Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee*, pp. 29-43.

³⁷ SIT 744/50, Draft Memo on the History and Development of Tiong Bahru Estate, 1950.

³⁸ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1997), p. 64.

³⁹ SIT 475/47, Letter from Lim Kim Tah to Chairman, Housing Committee, 15 Jun 1947. Lim also suggested that the wooden houses’ floor, as well as the kitchens, toilets and bathrooms, should be made of concrete.

⁴⁰ Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee*, pp. 7, 17.

⁴¹ SIT 475/47, Memo titled ‘Prefabricated Houses at Kuala Lumpur’ by J. M. Fraser, 13 Aug 1947.

planning housing estates, “dormitory towns” [for urban workers], industrial estates, satellite towns, light and heavy industry centres, recreational and other facilities’.⁴² The Committee envisaged moving some 400,000 people outside the Municipal limits within the next ten years; it was already necessary, then, for Singapore and its urban planners and architects to have a ‘Master Development Plan’.⁴³ Essentially, as the Australian Commissioner in Singapore aptly surmised, the colonial government was being urged to abandon its *laissez faire* approach to development in favour of structured planning to facilitate the emergence of Singapore as an industrial city.⁴⁴

Not only was the language of contagion prominent in the report, the medical establishment was also influential in determining trajectories of action. They had also argued for the dispersal of the Central Area population and for tight control over wooden housing. W. E. Hutchinson, the Deputy Municipal Health Officer, when asked to choose between building flats in the Central Area or at the outskirts of the city, replied that the latter was most likely to alleviate overcrowding and benefit the urban population’s health.⁴⁵ Another doctor suggested that the disused cemeteries in the inner city be acquired and developed, for ‘[w]e want ground for Housing the Living and not the Dead in space’.⁴⁶ P. S. Hunter submitted that dispersal would help control the incidence of tuberculosis.⁴⁷ However, he also urged the government to provide light, water and conservancy on vacant lands to encourage people to settle and construct wooden houses, since dwellings built by the occupiers themselves, he claimed, would be properly maintained. But he also emphasised that ‘all houses had to be built according to one or other type plan – no deviation, alliation [*sic*] or addition to be permitted’.⁴⁸

W. E. Hutchinson, in particular, was instrumental in extending the reach of the official gaze, hitherto restricted to the Central Area, to urban kampongs. In 1946,

⁴² SIT 475/47, Notes for Discussion on Housing by Commissioner of Lands, 13 Jun 1947.

⁴³ Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee*, pp. 9, 11-13.

⁴⁴ A4231/1948/Singapore, Despatch from Australian Commissioner to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 23 Aug 1948.

⁴⁵ SIT 475/47, Minutes of Meeting of the Housing Committee on 2 Jun 1947. The other two doctors consulted were Dr. N. A. Canton, Municipal Health Officer, and Dr. R. S. Johnson, Chief Health Officer.

⁴⁶ SIT 475/47, Report from Dr. K. Kiramathypathy to Chairman, Housing Committee, 26 Jun 1947. Kiramathypathy was a practitioner at Lanka Dispensary, Serangoon Road.

⁴⁷ SIT 475/47, Minutes of Meeting of the Housing Committee, 14 Jul 1947.

⁴⁸ SIT 475/47, Memo on Housing by Dr. P. S. Hunter, undated, c. 1947.

he had emphasised that ‘the erection of these huts to no layout, with no adequate drainage and sanitary offices, no refuse disposal, no water supply and dependent on wells, results in a possible foci for disease which MUST be appreciated’. Hutchinson warned of a possible contagion spreading to the General Hospital from Kampong Silat with a ‘collection of nearly 500 insanitary huts’, which had ‘grown immensely, and conditions have grossly deteriorated’. Citing a recent cholera outbreak in Malaya, he declared that ‘[w]hatever may be the killing property of overcrowding [in the Central Area] or the ill-health that may result, it has nothing of the urgency that now exists in the creation of these insanitary kampongs’.⁴⁹ In 1948, he called for the policy against unauthorised wooden housing to be expanded from demolition to surveillance, explaining that while many insanitary houses had been demolished before the war, it was necessary to exercise control *before* the houses were erected.⁵⁰ Hutchinson’s train of thought illustrated vividly Mary Douglas’ contention that ‘ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience’.⁵¹



Plate 3.1: The official photograph as part of the discursive language of clearance and rehousing. A dilapidated wooden house with attap roof in the Bukit Ho Swee area, year unknown. Note the spittoon outside the house and the unlit interior. Official photographs such as this typically focus on the poor housing conditions without showing signs of kampong life (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

⁴⁹ SIT 348/46, Memo by Deputy Municipal Health Officer to Chairman, SIT, 30 Oct 1946.

⁵⁰ SIT 808/50, Memo by Deputy Municipal Health Officer, 31 Aug 1948.

⁵¹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 5.



Plate 3.2: Two other themes of the official photographs: filth and the lack of social organisation. Discarded household items lie in open space in the Bukit Ho Swee area, as a resident walks past nonchalantly, 1947 (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 3.3: Another image of social disorganisation: uncleared rubbish in the Bukit Ho Swee area, year unknown (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 3.4: A powerful image of insanitation: an uncovered drain with stagnant water in the Bukit Ho Swee area, year unknown (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 3.5: The discursive image of social transgression and contamination: free-ranging pigs feed among the wooden houses in the Bukit Ho Swee area, c. 1930s (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

Sanitation and Surveillance

The medical establishment was ready to associate ill-health with the physical environment of kampongs but this was a perception not always corroborated by the

facts. Ill-ventilated, congested dwellings, and malnutrition, were declared to be crucial causal factors in its campaign to eradicate tuberculosis.⁵² According to a medical social worker in the 1950s, however, the disease was more prevalent in the Central Area shophouses than in wooden dwellings on the periphery of the city.⁵³ Tuberculosis was the leading cause of death in Singapore in 1947. The disease was a major public health concern after the war, particularly among children, with an incidence of 2.35 per 1,000 persons in 1947 but which fell continuously to 0.57 in 1960.⁵⁴ By 1959, the authorities acknowledged a gradual reduction in the death rate.⁵⁵ They had indeed wondered that the disease was not more prevalent 'in view of the many overcrowded cubicle dwellings which persist with most primitive kitchen and sanitary arrangements, the many squatter areas, and the thousands of hawkers to be met with in Singapore'.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, despite the lack of detailed empirical investigation into the incidence of tuberculosis in wooden housing, the perception of urban kampongs as sites of filth and disease was sufficient to determine official policy towards these settlements.

In 1949, on Hutchinson's recommendation, the Municipal Commission established an 'experimental Kampong Sanitation Squad' in Kampong Silat to lay sullage drains, clear existing drains and dispose of refuse and nightsoil.⁵⁷ The following year, the project was extended to Kampongs Alexandra, Amber and Geylang Serai. More than 7,000 feet of concrete drains were laid in 1950, while pig rearers in Kampong Alexandra were served notices to keep their pigs in stys. The project was, however, plainly uneconomical, siphoning off substantial Municipal labour from the daily tasks of city maintenance,⁵⁸ while much of the work was soon

⁵² MD, *Annual Report 1947*, p. 73; MD, *Annual Report 1949*, p. 47; MD, *Annual Report 1950*, p. 55.

⁵³ Author's interview with Joyce Horsley, 3 Nov 2007. Horsley worked with tuberculosis patients in Kampong Henderson in the mid-1950s. Even the extent of tuberculosis in shophouse housing appeared to have been exaggerated. In a study of the impact of the living environment of low-income families on the health of infants in the 1950s, while 52% and 25% of the housing of the Chinese and Indian families respectively were considered 'bad' according to living density and sanitary facilities and other amenities, the researchers found that '[t]he level of housing appeared to have no definite influence on the well-being of these infants'. E. M. Browne, 'A Survey of Singapore of Low Income Level Housing in Relation to Health of Infants', *Medical Journal of Malaya*, 8, 1954, pp. 237-38.

⁵⁴ MD, *Annual Report 1947*, p. 49; CC HD, *Annual Report*, 1948-1960.

⁵⁵ CC HD, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 5.

⁵⁶ MD, *Annual Report 1952*, p. 2. The medical authorities also conceded that '[m]any wild statements had been made in regard to its incidence in our local population but beyond crude deaths and death rates no reliable statistics exist'. MD, *Annual Report 1949*, p. 86.

⁵⁷ CC, *Administration Report 1949*, pp. 82-83, 130.

⁵⁸ CC, *Administration Report 1950*, pp. 84, 132; CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1950*, 4 Sep 1950.

lost due to in-filling in the kampongs.⁵⁹ The experiment was not extended to other urban kampongs, although it was initiated in 1954 in rural kampongs.⁶⁰ Public health inspectors, however, continued to visit the kampongs to ensure that pigs were kept in stys, no unauthorised housing was erected, and nightsoil was not being used as manure. But Table 3.1 shows that the time devoted to kampong inspection fluctuated. The number of wooden houses actually surveyed in the 1950s was small in relation to the total number of wooden houses (about 10,000 in 1959) found in the urban area, except in 1949, when over 15,000 houses were inspected as part of the study of the Attap Dwellings Special Committee (Table 3.1). This under-registration suggests that the sampling and surveillance was far from complete, particularly in the mid to late 1950s.

Table 3.1: Kampong Inspection by the City Council, 1949-1960

Year	Man-Working Days	No. of Wooden Houses Inspected
1949	356	15,614
1950	175	2,400
1951	N.A.	N.A.
1952	N.A.	N.A.
1953	220	3,362
1954	115	2,364
1955	304	4,393
1956	104	1,838
1957	145	2,582
1958	145	2,331
1959	111	4,244
1960	953	8,364

Source: CC Public Health Inspectors' Section, *Annual Report*, 1949-1960.

What hindered the inspection efforts, and caused much official anxiety, was the physical nature and social development of unauthorised wooden housing. Neatly-aligned blocks of public housing were 'designed to make a powerful visual impact as a *form*'.⁶¹ Urban kampongs, by contrast, displayed untidy exteriors which hid the social and economic order embedded within them. The 'messiness' on display was, to the authorities, simply a sign of chaos. The SIT worried over the fluidity of kampong spaces, where '[h]uts were erected with astonishing rapidity and when once in existence, it was difficult to get them demolished....The situation

⁵⁹ HB 408/52, Memo from City Health Officer to Commissioner of Lands, 23 May 1952.

⁶⁰ CC, *Administration Report 1952*, p. 14.

⁶¹ James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 104.

changed almost from day to day and was very difficult to control'.⁶² In 1953, the Trust established 'squatter patrols' to prevent the building of unauthorised wooden houses on Crown and Trust lands. The disorderliness and random nature of temporary dwellings also frustrated a basic means of administrative governance – cadastral surveying and mapping. The SIT, in a survey of wooden dwellings in 1953, realised that 'most of them are a maze of temporary buildings interpenetrated with pathways, the development being dense and chaotic'.⁶³ This form of ad-hoc housing, the Trust realised, was altogether far more difficult to regulate than the Central Area housing, with which they had dealt since the beginning of the twentieth century:

There is a lack of adequate maps. Unlike the central areas, which are comparatively changeless...the attap areas change almost from day to day with the result that even a map prepared one year previously is certain to be out of date.

The existing numbering system is chaotic and often non-existent. No direct reference could therefore be made from any sort of plan to a form based on an existing system – as was possible in the central areas.⁶⁴

Goh Keng Swee's 1956 study of low-income families also found that 'even with the best system of documentation, attap dwellings can sometimes be the most difficult to locate....The postal address of attap dwellings do not run in serial order....it is a common practice for unauthorised attap dwellings to borrow addresses belonging to other unauthorised houses in the neighbourhood'.⁶⁵ Joyce Horsley, a medical social worker looking after tuberculosis patients in Kampong Henderson in the mid-1950s, found the house numbers 'all jumbled up' and had to ask the residents for locations of specific dwellings.⁶⁶ Government surveyors even found it 'particularly difficult in some instances just to say what was a house, for occasionally, attap houses seem to have the habit in Singapore of enlarging their size

⁶² SIT, *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947*, p. 17.

⁶³ SIT 1218/53, Paper on Housing Surveys for United Nations Organisation by J. M. Fraser, 1953.

⁶⁴ SIT 1218/53, Paper on Housing Surveys for United Nations Organisation by J. M. Fraser, 1953.

⁶⁵ Goh, *Urban Incomes and Housing*, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Author's interview with Joyce Horsley, 3 Nov 2007.

Table 3.2: Number of Dwellings in Urban Kampongs in 1948 & 1958

Name of Kampong	Number of Houses in 1948	No. of Houses Numbered by City Assessor (1958)	As Suggested by City Assessor 50% Added to Give More Realistic Figure (1958)
Tiong Bahru	402	908	1,362
Boon Teck Road	617	577	865
Potong Pasir	550	468	702
Henderson Road	289	292	438
Amber	200	233	349
Radin Mas and Pahang	182	180	270
Ah Hood Road	N.A.	159	238
Bukit Ho Swee	232	144	216
Wak Tanjong	1,174*	133	199
Lorong 17	N.A.	117	175
Chia Heng	45	113	169
Silat	442	105	157
Beo Lane	55	90	135
Covent Garden	N.A.	81	121
Soopoo	132	81	121
Wayang Satu	300	72	108
Bukit Purmei	80	62	93
Bukit Teresa	N.A.	50	75
Pukat	N.A.	49	74
Heap Guan San	69	45	67
Ban Siew San	50	42	63
Bugis	N.A.	42	63
Jagoh	26	40	60
Lorong 27A	N.A.	36	54
Upper Woodleigh	60	32	48
Marican	50	29	43
Pasiran	N.A.	16	24
Lorong 3	N.A.	14	21
Bukit Kasita	25	10	15
Jalan Ampas	N.A.	9	13
Martin	161	8	12
Ampat	N.A.	7	10
Lorong 27A	N.A.	5	7
Pisang	N.A.	4	6
Teo Chew	25	3	4

* including adjacent areas.

Sources: CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1958*, 19-20 May, 1958, pp. 420-22; SIT 808/50, Memorandum from Deputy Municipal Health Officer to Municipal Health Officer, 31 August 1948.

by extension, from time to time, to the main structure'.⁶⁷ In December 1957, when the SIT updated its survey of the urban kampongs, it discovered 'in many areas an alarming increase' of unauthorised wooden housing. The Trust concluded that '[t]he only issue is whether it is haphazard and uncontrolled, or whether it is to be properly controlled and a minimum of service and amenities provided for the inhabitants'.⁶⁸ Table 3.2 shows differences in the numbers of wooden dwellings estimated by W. E. Hutchinson in his 1948 survey compared with those listed by the City Council a decade later, highlighting the difficulty of municipal control over the spread of wooden housing. It is also evident from Table 3.2 that Bukit Ho Swee, Beo Lane and Tiong Bahru were already on the official 'radar' as early as 1948.

Demolition and Dishousing: The Work of the Municipal Commission and the City Council

Given the problems of building control, the Municipal Commission adopted a piecemeal and reactive policy towards the establishment of unauthorised housing. Its main blunt response was, for a long time, demolition. In July 1941, prior to the collapse of British power, the Commission had authorised the construction of wooden housing in the Municipal area as a temporary war-time measure.⁶⁹ Immediately after the war, however, the Commission had no legal power over unauthorised wooden housing built on Crown land during the Japanese Occupation and the period of the British Military Administration (BMA), from September 1945 to April 1946. In September 1946, a number of owners of unauthorised wooden housing located on the disused cemetery in Tiong Bahru, who had rebuilt their houses to Municipal requirements, submitted their building plans to the Commission for approval. Despite an objection from some quarters that this would encourage the construction of more haphazard and insanitary wooden housing, the Commission granted them temporary permits on the condition that no further building take

⁶⁷ Goh, *Urban Incomes and Housing*, p. 67.

⁶⁸ HB 52/56, Report by Planning Adviser (Planning Coordination Committee) on Housing, undated, c. 1958.

⁶⁹ SIT 545/41, Memo from President, Municipal Commissioners, to Private Secretary to the Colonial Secretary, 25 Jul 1941.

place.⁷⁰ It then decided in 1948 to issue 2-year annual permits to owners of unauthorised housing built on Crown lands during the Japanese and BMA periods.⁷¹ The purpose of issuing tenancies and TOLs was to regularise settlement patterns and bring the unauthorised wooden housing under some form of direct control, enabling future action against the occupants.⁷²

The authorities, however, were determined to remove unauthorised housing built on Crown land after the BMA period. In 1946, the SIT ordered 82 families, who had built unauthorised wooden houses on Crown land on Owen and Dorset roads in April and May, to move to Kim Keat Road. The dwellers were mostly political refugees from 'riot areas upcountry' with no relatives in Singapore and had 'lost their all through Japanese aggression'.⁷³ They pleaded to remain at their site for two years, as they were

poor labourers, coolies and hawkers....due to our ignorance and illiteracy and due to the fact that as there was no other house where we could move in, we were compelled to erect the existing huts with all the savings we had without obtaining the necessary sanction from your honour.⁷⁴

In 1948, 69 of the cases were evicted without managing to secure a lease on Trust land for farming or housing in artisans' quarters as initially promised by the SIT.⁷⁵

In the previous year, the SIT's Lands Section recommended immediate action against 'all new squatters' and to treat 'existing squatters' who refused to vacate as 'trespassers'.⁷⁶ In 1948, Yap Pheng Geck, an unofficial member of the Municipal Commission and a Chinese community leader, represented the owners of

⁷⁰ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1946*, 16 Sep 1946.

⁷¹ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1948*, 12 Jan 1948.

⁷² SIT 843/52, Memo from Acting Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, to Manager, SIT, 19 May 1953.

⁷³ SIT 148/46, Letter from Consul General of the Republic of China to Commissioner of Lands, 6 Nov 1946.

⁷⁴ SIT 148/46, Signed Petition from 82 Persons to Engineer, SIT, 20 Sep 1946.

⁷⁵ SIT 148/46, Memo from Lands Officer, SIT, to Manager, SIT, 22 Jan 1948; and Signed Petition from 19 Persons to Manager, SIT, 12 Apr 1948.

⁷⁶ SIT 650/47, Memo titled 'Squatters on SIT Land' from Lands Section, SIT, to Manager, SIT, 22 Sep 1947.

137 unauthorised dwellings served with Mandatory (demolition) Orders by the courts, including owners of ten houses opposite the Tiong Bahru Estate. The owners were contesting the demolition of their structurally sound dwellings on the sole basis that they were built without authority. When Yap asked if such housing could be considered necessary in view of the housing shortage, the official reply was ‘that unauthorised buildings are erected in defiance of the law, no matter how pressing the necessity’.⁷⁷ In 1949, however, the Commission grudgingly agreed to permit dwellers issued with Mandatory Orders to rebuild their structures to comply with Municipal standards, whereupon they would be issued temporary permits.⁷⁸

In October 1950, the Municipal Commission formed an Attap Dwellings Special Committee to investigate the execution of Mandatory Orders issued against unauthorised wooden housing. The Committee surveyed a 10% sample of wooden housing in the Municipal area.⁷⁹ Its report, completed in November 1951 and adopted by the City Council, recommended that no new unauthorised wooden dwellings be permitted in the City and that the government should establish a housing authority to build permanent or semi-permanent ‘workers’ dwellings’ close to the urban kampongs to ‘minimise disturbance of occupational ties’ of the residents. The Committee felt that

[v]ery little can be done (by provision of access roads, drains etc.) to improve areas of attap dwellings, at any rate the worst ones, and any funds available to do what could be done would be better spent by way of schemes for their replacement by better dwellings. The existing areas should therefore be accepted as a necessary (but diminishing) evil while schemes for their replacement are progressing.⁸⁰

D. C. Rae, the Municipal Architect, argued for the wooden dwellings to be moved to more outlying areas so as not to obstruct the expansion of commercial and industrial

⁷⁷ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1948*, 13 Dec 1948, 20 Dec 1948.

⁷⁸ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1949*, Memo titled ‘Attap “Dwelling” Areas: Report No. 1’.

⁷⁹ A total of 1,109 dwellings and 1,351 families were surveyed.

⁸⁰ SIT 808/50, Draft Report of the Attap Dwellings Special Committee, undated, c. 1951.

activities from the Central Area.⁸¹ The Committee, concurring, proposed that the government or SIT acquire an area at the outskirts of the City for 3,000 wooden houses to be built according to a particular 'type plan' for people evicted from unauthorised dwellings.⁸² The report hardened the City Council's attitude towards unauthorised wooden housing, whose members decided that '[v]igorous action involving prosecution and demolition is the only way in which this open contempt of the City's building regulations can be tackled'.⁸³ In 1952, the Council began court proceedings against the owners of unauthorised housing on Crown land at Carey Road.⁸⁴ In July 1953, the Council commenced demolishing, with 'no exceptions', newly- or partly-erected unauthorised wooden dwellings, with its staff accompanied by policemen to prevent a breach of the peace.⁸⁵ The City Health Department enthusiastically welcomed such punitive action taken against the 'insanitary huts'.⁸⁶

Elsewhere within government circles, demolition was a deeply-resented policy. The courts were reluctant to issue Mandatory Orders to evict wooden house dwellers in light of the current housing shortage while legal proceedings against such housing were frequently protracted;⁸⁷ in 1959, it still took at least 2-3 months for a judgment to be reached.⁸⁸ Chinese community leaders consistently pressed the government not to demolish existing wooden housing without first building sufficient numbers of low-cost housing.⁸⁹ The *Nanyang Siang Pau* argued that the solution to the problem of unauthorised housing was to build new houses, not demolish existing ones.⁹⁰ In mid-1952, Yap Pheng Geck had protested that many occupants had been given only five minutes to remove their belongings before their houses were demolished, and although the residents 'begged the labourers who were pulling down our houses to allow us to retain the materials of the buildings', '[t]hey

⁸¹ SIT 808/50, Municipal Architect's Scheme for Dealing with the Question of the Execution of Mandatory Orders for Demolition of Unauthorised Attap Dwelling Houses and Resettlement of the Occupiers, 23 Mar 1950.

⁸² SIT 808/50, Minutes of Meeting of the Attap Dwellings Special Committee, 14 Nov 1951.

⁸³ CC, *Administration Report 1952*, p. 20.

⁸⁴ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1952*, 11 Aug 1952.

⁸⁵ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1952*, 10 Jan 1952; CC, *Administration Report 1953*, pp. 18, 218.

⁸⁶ CC HD, *Administration Report 1953*, p. 86.

⁸⁷ SIT 808/50, Municipal Architect's Scheme for Dealing with the Question of the Execution of Mandatory Orders for Demolition of Unauthorised Attap Dwelling Houses and Resettlement of the Occupiers, 23 Mar 1950.

⁸⁸ HB 364/58, Memo from Lands Manager, SIT, to Secretary, SIT, 11 Jun 1959.

⁸⁹ *NYSP*, 7 Jul 1960.

⁹⁰ *NYSP*, 29 Jan 1954.

threw all our building materials into the river'. 'More than 300 persons', Yap surmised, consequently 'are rendered homeless and having now to sleep in open air and are suffering the pangs of hunger'. Amid rising anger and dismay, Yap asked, '[i]f the Authorities do not allow people to build houses in the area, why did they not prevent anyone from building from the beginning?'⁹¹

In six months, the City Council proudly proclaimed, the demolition policy slashed the average monthly number of new unauthorised houses from 100 to 15 (and 14 by the following year). A serious dishousing difficulty, however, soon surfaced, forcing the Council to form a subcommittee to examine a problem of their own creation.⁹² In 1955, the Council suspended the demolition. In May that year, the police had withdrawn protection for demolition squads not possessing Mandatory Orders,⁹³ ostensibly because there was no legal sanction for the police to assist in the demolition work,⁹⁴ but also because, it was feared by then, police presence would itself provoke a breach of the peace.⁹⁵ 'The first riot', the SIT's Lands Division correctly predicted, 'will cause a revision of this decision'.⁹⁶ Police support was restored in early 1956, following an incident where a demolition squad in Toa Payoh without an escort was assaulted by house owners.⁹⁷

In August 1955, though, the City Council was forced to revise its policy on unauthorised wooden housing. On the advice of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party, it designated areas in the City with wooden houses and the adjacent vacant lands as 'attap areas'; in effect authorising the vacant lands for settlement, although demolition of dwellings would still be carried out in non-designated areas.⁹⁸ In sanctioning such a move, the Council attempted once again to bring unauthorised wooden housing under some form of direct control. Five

⁹¹ HB 408/52, Letter from Yap Pheng Geck to Manager, SIT, 11 Jul 1952.

⁹² CC, *Administration Report 1953*, pp. 18, 218-19; CC, *Administration Report 1954*, p. 251.

⁹³ CC, *Administration Report 1955*, p. 20.

⁹⁴ HB 659/53, Senior Assistant Commissioner's Directive No. 24/55 titled 'Evictions Policy', 17 Oct 1955

⁹⁵ HB 659/53, Senior Assistant Commissioner's Directive No. 20/55 titled 'Evictions Policy and SIT', 2 Aug 1955.

⁹⁶ SIT 993/50, Lands Division Monthly Report Jul 1955.

⁹⁷ HB 659/53, Memo from President, CC, to PS, MLGLH, 25 Nov 1955; and Report on the Demolition of Three Structures at Toa Payoh on 26 Aug 1955 by Deputy Collector of Land Revenue, 31 Aug 1955.

⁹⁸ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1955*, 31 Aug 1955, pp. 494-47.

kampongs which were not overly-congested were designated as 'attap areas', to be provided with 'spine' roads (for the passage of fire engines and refuse collection), open spaces and children's playgrounds. The Working Party also mandated a distance of 25 feet between the walls of new and existing wooden houses, concrete floors and asbestos or corrugated iron roofs and kitchen walls.⁹⁹ The Council hoped that with these measures, wooden houses in the City would 'for the next 20 years form a necessary part of general housing policy'.¹⁰⁰ In reality, the actual regulation of unauthorised wooden dwellings was beyond the powers of the City Fathers. In 1956, the Architect and Building Surveyor's Department found that 'a considerable number' of wooden houses had been erected without its authorisation and that 'it is only with the greatest difficulty that we have been able to obtain any compliance with the very minor requirements set out in the [Working Party's] Report'.¹⁰¹ Sometimes, evicted occupiers simply vacated the dwelling without demolishing it, whereby new tenants often moved in.¹⁰² In hindsight, the City Council's demolition policy, in directing those dishoused to other urban kampongs, was to prove incredibly short-sighted.

Clearance and Resettlement: The SIT Response

While the City Council struggled to stem the tide of unauthorised dwellings, the SIT, given the nature of its work, was undertaking a more aggressive social policy. In 1947, upon the Housing Committee's recommendation of launching a three-year building programme, the SIT began to construct 'low-cost' housing at the margins of the City, but still within four miles of the Central Area. Families earning under \$600 a month qualified for the housing, although the ceiling was reduced to \$400 in 1956. The following year, the SIT received a \$5 million loan from the

⁹⁹ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1955*, Report on the Possibility of Designating Attap Areas in the City Area, p. 1075. The 'attap areas' were 1) in the northeast of the City, the area bounded by Bartley, Paya Lebar and Upper Serangoon roads in Paya Lebar district, totalling 260 acres, 2) in the southeast, the area from Kampong Wak Tanjong, Geylang Serai to the junction of Changi and Siglap roads, totalling 600 acres, 3) in the southwest, two areas, being the Radin Mas locality up to the Malayan Railway line and the area north of Telok Blangah Road, totalling 200 acres, and 4) in the northwest, off Bukit Timah Road just outside the City limits, totalling 180 acres. In 1958, the two areas in the southwest became operative.

¹⁰⁰ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1956*, 29 Feb 1956, p. 1076.

¹⁰¹ CC ABSD, *Annual Report 1956*, p. 9.

¹⁰² SIT 462/53, Memo from Lands Inspector, SIT, to Senior Lands Inspector, SIT, 24 Sep 1953.

government to fund the building programme. The area west of the Singapore River witnessed a mushrooming of Trust housing in the following decade. In 1947-1954, 1,324 new dwellings and shops, including 4-storey blocks of flats, were added to Tiong Bahru Estate. Henderson Estate, with 156 dwellings and shops, emerged between 1948-1949, as did Havelock Road (or Delta) Estate, with 585 dwellings and shops, between 1950-1953, and Bukit Merah (or Redhill) Estate, with 1,304 dwellings and shops, between 1952-1955. Slum clearance schemes also contributed more permanent housing to the locality. For example, between 1948-1952, 467 dwellings and shops were built as part of the Kampong Silat improvement scheme, transforming what had early on been identified as an insanitary area located close to the General Hospital.¹⁰³ In 1957, the SIT started demolition work in relation to the improvement scheme at Covent Garden, where blocks of one-room flats were to be built and the kampong's 650 families moved to Trust flats being erected in Queenstown New Town to the west.¹⁰⁴

Urban kampong communities found themselves increasingly displaced by the pace of the SIT housing development. In 1951, the SIT, which managed large urban kampongs on Trust land on tenancy agreements, revealed that its lands at Alexandra Road, Kampong Java, Farrer Road, south of Tiong Bahru Road, and Alexandra Estate (West), which were available for housing, would soon be exhausted. In contemplating new areas, the Trust targeted the 'best housing sites on the Island and in the City [which] are occupied by graves and squatters, often adjacent'.¹⁰⁵ In 1952, the SIT assumed control of Crown lands in the Kallang Basin, Kampong Alexandra and Henderson Road where 2,400 families were staying in 600 wooden dwellings under TOLs, which were 'either insanitary or scheduled for development'. The Trust estimated that 1,000 families would require rehousing from these areas in the next two years due to housing and industrial development.¹⁰⁶ Kampong Alexandra and Henderson Road, in particular, were viewed as 'two distinct and very large problems', which required an estimated 2,000 new units of

¹⁰³ SIT, *Annual Report 1949*, p. 35.

¹⁰⁴ SIT, *Annual Report 1957*, p. 21; HB 1139/56, Memo from Assistant Architect, SIT, to Chief Architect, SIT, 10 Sep 1957.

¹⁰⁵ SIT, *Annual Report 1951*, p. 24; CO 968/395, Memo from Governor F. C. Gimson to Colonial Office, 2 Sep 1952.

¹⁰⁶ SIT, *Annual Report 1952*, p. 39.

housing for the displaced families.¹⁰⁷ At Kampong Silat, the improvement scheme dispersed its population, voluntarily or otherwise, into SIT flats, wooden houses nearby or onto non-Trust land.¹⁰⁸ In 1958, the SIT owned about 1,000 acres of land in Toa Payoh, Kampong Henderson, Kampong Alexandra, Bukit Purmei, Kallang Basin, MacPherson Road (South), Thomson Road, Bukit Timah, and Tiong Bahru, where many residents were residing under tenancy agreements or TOLs. While inadequate finance, high cost of building materials and insufficient skilled building labour hampered the SIT's building programme in the 1950s,¹⁰⁹ the greatest difficulty lay in clearing away wooden house dwellers. J. M. Fraser believed that clearance, rather than building capacity, was the true bottleneck in the Trust's construction programme.¹¹⁰ There were some unauthorised occupiers regularly 'appearing' on Crown lands targeted for development in order to obtain compensation or SIT housing but they were a small minority.¹¹¹

Clearance was a complex operation but the root cause of its difficulty was primarily economic. Clearance from land required for development, unlike the eviction of 'trespassers', was accompanied by an SIT offer of some form of rehousing but whether this was deemed suitable by the dwellers was a separate matter. For farmers, the chief difficulty was that most agricultural land was already under cultivation,¹¹² while they also resisted converting to an urban lifestyle. Two farming families in Kim Keat, when evicted and offered accommodation by the SIT, demanded, '[H]ow can you expect us to give up our living system by altering the country life to city life?....That is to say let the vegetables grow on rocks'.¹¹³

The greater problem, however, was rehousing urban and semi-urban kampong dwellers in flats. What the Trust labelled as 'low-cost' housing was certainly not so to the low-income population. The SIT conveniently blamed applicants for its flats for 'choosiness', as they allegedly

¹⁰⁷ HB 711/53, Memo from Acting Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, to Manager, SIT, 13 Oct 1953.

¹⁰⁸ SIT 262/48, Report of Work by the Lands Section, May-Aug 1948.

¹⁰⁹ CO 1022/433, Despatch from Governor F. Gimson to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 4 Feb 1952; SIT, *Annual Report 1951*, p. 8.

¹¹⁰ SIT 84/56, Minutes of Meeting on Long Term Expenditure Programme, 26 Jul 1956.

¹¹¹ HB 408/1/52, Report titled 'Census of Rehousing from Trust and Crown Land', 18 Jun 1952.

¹¹² SIT, *Annual Report 1957*, pp. 5-6.

¹¹³ SIT 183/52, Letter from Aung Peang & Teo Ah Beh to Lands Manager, SIT, 8 Oct 1954.

hold superstitious beliefs concerning the citing of a flat; generally they prefer mid-floor flats to top or ground floor; they expect a bus service to take them from door of house to office, and generally have a horror of isolation and quietness....On an average, approximately 50 per cent of the applicants refuse a first offer of accommodation.¹¹⁴

More importantly, however, the authorities found that some wooden house dwellers could not 'afford even the lowest type of Trust accommodation and that they will not move great distances from their work as the cost of transport is too great'.¹¹⁵ It was extremely difficult to find accommodation for those earning less than \$200 a month,¹¹⁶ who could not afford a monthly rent of \$10.¹¹⁷ The SIT perceived 'a fundamental objection amongst the local population, particularly the lower paid classes, to paying rent at all, and most of them would rather pay \$5 a month for space in an overcrowded shophouse or an attap hut than pay a reasonable proportion, say up to 20% of their income, for good accommodation'.¹¹⁸ Particularly difficult were the poor semi-urban dwellers, who

are not farmers but the household budget is aided a great deal by the vegetables, fruit, eggs and poultry obtained from the land surrounding their house. These families cannot move into farming settlements far from their employment nor do they look with favour on the prospect of becoming a tenant of a permanent house. The higher rent and service charges coupled with the loss of produce from their garden often makes it impossible for them to accept such accommodation.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ SIT, *Annual Report 1950*, p. 21; SIT, *Annual Report 1953*, p. 53-55.

¹¹⁵ SIT 70/1/53, Memo titled 'Resettlement Areas for Attap Dwellers' by Commissioner of Lands, 1 Oct 1952.

¹¹⁶ SIT, *Annual Report 1955*, p. 9.

¹¹⁷ SIT 952/50, Extract from Memo by Commissioner of Lands on the Problem of Squatters on Crown Land, 26 Oct 1950.

¹¹⁸ SIT 952/50, Comments on Memo by Commissioner of Lands on the Problem of Squatters on Crown Land by Manager, SIT, 13 Nov 1950.

¹¹⁹ Singapore, *Report of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party*, p. 5.

There was little practical difference between the eviction of ‘trespassers’ and the clearance of low-income tenants due to urban development. Among the 411 families dishoused in the Kampong Silat improvement scheme in 1949, only 159 accepted Trust accommodation while the majority moved elsewhere.¹²⁰ Pek Cheng Siew, a trishaw rider supporting a family of ten, lived in an attap house at Geylang Lorong 41 built on Trust land during the Japanese Occupation.¹²¹ When he was notified by the SIT to move to a flat because the land had been earmarked by the Master Plan for a children’s playground, he protested,

I am a poor man with a large family to support and am paying rent for land at \$4 per month only and the assessment at \$10.20 per half annum....With my meagre income, I could not afford to stay in SIT premises which is very expensive....I have not applied for SIT premises nor have any intention of removing from my present abode.¹²²

Under such circumstances, it was often so difficult for landowners to clear land for development that they occasionally resorted to hiring secret society gangsters to intimidate the residents.¹²³ The SWD frequently mediated disputes between landowners and a combination of tenants, subtenants and illegal trespassers who would ‘usually band together and employ a lawyer’; these negotiations were often protracted because the dwellers’ demands were allegedly ‘outrageous’ and because the landowners invariably refused to compromise.¹²⁴

In 1952, as an adjunct to the clearance project, the government initiated a ‘squatter resettlement programme’ to allow persons evicted from Crown or Council land required for development to build wooden houses on 10-year permits, initially outside the City limits.¹²⁵ In 1957, the SIT’s Resettlement Department was

¹²⁰ SIT, *Annual Report 1949*, p. 35.

¹²¹ SIT 770/55, Letter from Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, to Laycock & Ong, 2 Dec 1955.

¹²² SIT 770/55, Letter from Pek Cheng Siew to Estates Manager, SIT, 25 Nov 1955.

¹²³ Authors’ interviews with Poh Soon Seng, 19 Sep 2006; and C. C. Chin, 24 Nov 2006.

¹²⁴ SIT 808/50, Paper, titled ‘Resettlement’, by Commissioner of Lands and Acting Secretary for Social Welfare, 16 Jul 1952.

¹²⁵ HB 711/53, Memo from Chairman, SIT, to Commissioner of Lands, 16 Oct 1953.

managing 18 such areas, with 16 more mapped and awaiting acquisition.¹²⁶ Resettlement areas were, in principle at least, intended as 'self-help' settlements with minimum expense and supervision but the construction of fish and duck ponds and pig stys and pig breeding were expressly prohibited.¹²⁷ The Acting Deputy Lands Manager emphasised that the settlements had to be 'subjected to very rigid control from the beginning', since '[t]o allow persons to move on to the land and build whatever they please within certain limits only leads to a continual running fight with the builders on the interpretation of the limits'.¹²⁸

In 1954, when the SIT began clearing more than 300 families in Kampong Henderson, 69 families registered for Trust housing at Brickworks Estate at Alexandra Road while 120 applied to move to a resettlement area.¹²⁹ The former, however, found the rental and cost of living much higher than before, while the farmers who moved into rural resettlement areas faced greater traveling distances to town and consequently higher transport costs.¹³⁰ Some applicants rejected the Brickworks housing because the monthly rental (\$26.50) was simply too high.¹³¹ Others later left the flats and returned to their wooden houses in Henderson,¹³² while new settlers occupied vacated wooden dwellings in the kampong without authorisation.¹³³ The dwellers, in a petition to the authorities, strongly felt that the '[a]ttap houses were built to house the dwellers permanently'.¹³⁴ Owing to the difficulty of resettlement, the Henderson clearance was, by early 1956, 'dormant'.¹³⁵

¹²⁶ SIT, *Annual Report 1957*, p. 29.

¹²⁷ HB 808/1/50, Memo from Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, to Manager, SIT, 12 Nov 1952; CC, *Administration Report 1952*, p. 10; SIT, *Annual Report 1952*, p. 33.

¹²⁸ HB 808/1/50, Memo by Acting Deputy Lands Manager, 20 Oct 1953.

¹²⁹ SIT 521/1/29, Letter from Acting Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, to Mak Pak Shee, 13 Aug 1954.

¹³⁰ Joyce Horsley, *Resettlement of a Community: Discussion of the Problems Arising from the Disorganisation of a Community in Singapore*, unpublished academic exercise, Department of Social Studies, University of Malaya, 1956, pp. 125-35.

¹³¹ SIT 140/54, Memo from Acting Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, to Estates Officer, SIT, 23 Sep 1954; and SIT 521/1/29, Letter from Ng Chwee Peng to Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, 25 Jun 1954.

¹³² SIT 140/54, Memo from Senior Lands Inspector, SIT, to Estates Officer, SIT, 24 Aug 1955.

¹³³ SIT 430/54, Schedule of Unauthorised Occupation at Kampong Henderson Noted on Inspection by the Deputy Lands Manager, 19 Jun 1956; and SIT 140/54, Memo from Senior Lands Inspector, SIT, to Estates Officer, SIT, 1 Jun 1955.

¹³⁴ HB 908/50, Petition Addressed to the Secretary of Chinese Affairs by Four Representatives of the Villagers of the Henderson Road Area, undated, c. 1953.

¹³⁵ SIT 140/54, Memo from Estates Officer, SIT, to Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, 28 Mar 1956.

Clearance became a major stumbling block for the government when the SIT began work on Queenstown 'suburb' in the western part of the City in 1952. Envisaged as a 'modern, efficient and complete town', Queenstown was to house 65,000 people in five neighbourhoods, each served by shops, schools and other community services.¹³⁶ However, the project was delayed by the clearance of 372 families living on Crown lands under TOLs. The Trust offered the non-agricultural families, many of whom had lived there for a generation or more,¹³⁷ low-rental housing nearby but only six families accepted.¹³⁸ In 1955, the 75 bona fide agriculturalists were offered an ex-gratia payment, a house lot and a farming lot at the Jurong resettlement area, but this site, eleven miles from the City, was unpopular. In October, the government finally obtained eviction warrants against the remaining families who had refused the terms.¹³⁹ It was not until the following year that the first neighbourhood, Princess Estate, with 1,793 dwellings and flats, was completed. The second, Duchess Estate, was completed in 1958 with 752 dwellings, after the resistance of the local dwellers had been overcome.¹⁴⁰ Interestingly, the public response to the Queenstown flats was lukewarm, for reasons of 'lack of school facilities', 'absence of cinemas', 'long travelling distances to work', 'all charges are considered part of the "rent" by applicants and the total is considered by them to be beyond their ability to pay', 'preference for the town area', 'dislike for flats', and 'dislike of tall buildings or ground floor flats'.¹⁴¹ What appeared to be the Trust's seeming success at clearance, in the absence of a viable rehousing programme with adequate social amenities, proved to be the City Council's bane. Evicting urban kampong dwellers in one area was akin to causing the proverbial jump 'from the frying pan into the fire', simply driving the homeless into one of the remaining unscathed kampongs.

The social complications of the clearance policy, particularly at Queenstown, led the government to appoint a Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party¹⁴²

¹³⁶ SIT, *Annual Report 1953*, pp. 44-45.

¹³⁷ SIT 563/8/54, Speech by Chairman, SIT, at the Opening of Forfar House, Queenstown, 24 Oct 1956.

¹³⁸ SIT, *Annual Report 1954*, p. 15.

¹³⁹ SIT, *Annual Report 1955*, p. 27.

¹⁴⁰ SIT 1018/1/50, Memo from Acting Civil Engineer, SIT, Acting Chief Architect, SIT, 9 Jun 1958; and SIT, *Annual Report 1956*, p. 15.

¹⁴¹ HB 477/53, Memo from Acting Manager, SIT, to Chairman, SIT, 30 Dec 1954.

¹⁴² Also called the 'Squatter Problem Working Party'.

in 1955, to make recommendations towards solving the 'squatter problem'. The Working Party categorised kampong dwellers into three subgroups: urban and semi-urban dwellers and farmers. The focus was on semi-urban dwellers who, unlike the other two groups, could not readily go to a rural resettlement area or an SIT flat.¹⁴³ The Working Party understood that rehousing a semi-urban dweller in a flat mandated a transformation of life and not just a change of housing:

Most of these families are rural type dwellers, i.e. they have always lived in plank and attap houses, they have always depended on wells or standpipes for their supply of water, and they have never experienced water borne sewerage. On the other hand, they have always experienced a form of freedom which is absent in permanent thickly populated urban districts in that an increase in the family can be accommodated by extending the house, and when they are out of work, they can spend more time on the land and produce food. Their rent to the land owner is small and they have a feeling of independence and ownership.

The threat of eviction to these people is a serious matter. If they move into rooms in a permanent house, they lose the produce of their gardens. If they erect their house elsewhere they must obtain permission of the landowner, the local authority and the Singapore Improvement Trust or else face a further eviction. Whatever move they make their former sense of security is destroyed.¹⁴⁴

The Working Party proposed four rehousing schemes for evicted dwellers to 1) find their own accommodation (these had to satisfy building and planning laws); 2) accept SIT accommodation; 3) accept wooden housing in planned 'semi-urban settlements', which could be 'tolerated attap areas' in urban or rural areas; and 4) join farming settlements. The Working Party, however, rejected the idea of ad-hoc 'self-help' housing, maintaining that many settlers lacked the skill and experience, and proposed that a basic house be provided for them instead in semi-urban and

¹⁴³ HB 722/55, Notes of a Meeting to Discuss the Squatter Problem in Singapore, 29 Aug 1955.

¹⁴⁴ HB 722/55, Notes for Consideration of the 'Squatter Problem' Working Party, undated, c. 1955.

farming settlements. It was also felt that '[s]ettlers living in Semi-urban and Farming Settlements would become land owners and form a more stable community than tenants or shack-dwellers' – indicating the official desire to integrate kampong dwellers into the formal structures and governance of the state, so foreshadowing the policy of the PAP government.¹⁴⁵ The Working Party's rejection of 'self-help' housing, despite the possibility of improving living conditions in the kampongs, reflected a deep-seated official aversion towards unauthorised wooden housing and a determination to closely manage future settlement patterns.¹⁴⁶ In 1957, on the Working Party's recommendation, the SIT became the sole clearance and resettlement authority. A separate Resettlement Department was established within the Trust, with seven Resettlement Inspectors recruited, mainly from Malaya, to manage the resettlement areas. This was, as Clancey points out, an attempt in part at least by the Singapore authorities to apply the principles of the large-scale resettlement of Chinese squatters taking place in planned New Villages in Malaya.¹⁴⁷ The following year, in order to regularise the administration of state lands, the SIT began to convert TOLs into tenancy agreements.

Planning and Zoning

Given the postwar difficulties faced by the City Council and SIT, the British colonial government realised the need for a coordinated policy attack on 'squatters', unauthorised housing and unstable urban spaces. Following the Housing Committee's call for the production of a Master Plan, the SIT began work on a Diagnostic Survey to collect the necessary demographic and social information. This was based on the legal framework provided by the Town and Country Planning Act in Britain, which authorised the collection of information for a development plan.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ Singapore, *Report of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party*, pp. 2, 5, 9-12.

¹⁴⁶ Author's interview with William S. W. Lim, 25 Oct 2006. Lim, a prominent architect, had been involved in a self-help improvement programme in a kampong in Jakarta in the 1950s. Lim argued in 1967 for the gradual rehabilitation, as opposed to outright removal, of urban slums in developing countries. William S. W. Lim, 'Rehabilitation – A Possible Solution to Urban Slums in Developing Countries', in *2nd Afro-Asian Housing Congress* (Singapore, 1967).

¹⁴⁷ SIT, *Annual Report 1952*, p. 28; Clancey, 'Towards a Spatial History of Emergency', p. 40. In 1952, a British newspaper had suggested that Singapore, in tackling the severe housing problem, could learn from the 'regrouping' of Chinese squatters in Malaya, as 'emergency action' appeared to be the only solution. *Manchester Guardian*, 1 Oct 1952.

¹⁴⁸ SIT, *The Work of the Singapore Improvement Trust 1927-1947*, p. 39.

In 1948, the Singapore government was personally advised by British town planner Sir Patrik Abercrombie, hailed locally as ‘probably the greatest living expert on town and country planning’.¹⁴⁹ Following this visit, J. M. Fraser left to consult housing and planning authorities in Britain. In July 1950, he reiterated the importance of formulating a long-range development plan and of the will and means to implement it.¹⁵⁰ In the same year, George L. Pepler, long-time Chief Planning Officer in the government of Britain, was appointed Planning Adviser to the Singapore government; the SIT rejoiced that ‘no better choice could have been made’.¹⁵¹

The Diagnostic Survey, led by Pepler and Fraser and carried out between 1952-1954, included a dwelling-to-dwelling investigation of the most densely-populated urban kampongs, compiling data on the use and location of each house and the number of occupants. While this study was less detailed than that of the Central Area, it represented a key step forward in mapping the semi-autonomous settlements.¹⁵² In an urgent memorandum on the government’s housing policy to Governor John Nicoll in mid-1954, S. C. Woolmer, Chief Architect of the SIT, and D. H. Komlosy, the Planning Adviser of the SIT and Chief Planning Officer of the Diagnostic Survey Team, declared that housing in Singapore had been a ‘very hand to mouth affair’ and called for ‘efforts that must be made NOW’ and ‘steps that must be taken AT THIS MOMENT’ to lay down a ‘firm coordinated policy’ and enable an enlarged SIT to expand the housing programme.¹⁵³ The findings of the Diagnostic Survey led to the production of the Master Plan, a comprehensive 20-year development plan for Singapore, which became the cornerstone of colonial and to a large extent PAP housing policy. The Plan, published in 1955 and adopted in 1958, was presented as a ‘bold plan’ for ‘a better future’, since ‘[t]he consequences of not planning for the growth of a modern state, with all its social complexities and diverse economic problems, are too serious to contemplate’.¹⁵⁴ Dispersal of the

¹⁴⁹ Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee*, p. 12; SIT, *Annual Report 1948*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ SIT 645/50, Memo by Manager, SIT, titled ‘Singapore Development Plan’, 21 Jul 1950.

¹⁵¹ SIT, *Annual Report 1950*, p. 8.

¹⁵² SIT, *Annual Report 1952*, p. 28; *Annual Report 1953*, pp. 37-38.

¹⁵³ SIT 617/54, Memo titled ‘Housing Programmes and Policy’ by Chief Architect, SIT, and Planning Adviser, SIT, 5 Jul 1954.

¹⁵⁴ Singapore, *The Better Future: An Explanation of the Master Plan* (Singapore: 1958), p. 1.

Central Area population to permanent housing in the outer urban areas and in new towns outside the City was, as Table 3.3 shows, integral to the Plan.

Concerning the urban kampongs, the Master Plan's thrust was containment, contraction and clearance. This policy was in accord with its characteristic framework of zoning, which categorised land use according to residential, industrial, recreational, and other functions. The Plan held that '[t]he Attap Dwelling will not be appropriate within the built-up precincts of a modern City',¹⁵⁵ and identified 154,900 dwellers who were being or likely to be cleared due to development.¹⁵⁶ It accepted, as Table 3.4 shows, only 148,000 persons (12% of Singapore's population in 1953) to reside in wooden housing in the City, nearly 100,000 less than the prevailing figure.¹⁵⁷ The Plan sought to resettle, over twenty years, 161,000 out of 246,000 urban kampong dwellers in either permanent housing (to be built at an annual rate of 10,000 units) or resettlement areas. Some of the resettlement areas would be located in the urban area, housing 63,000 persons and containing, at five persons per house, 12,600 wooden dwellings.¹⁵⁸

The outstanding 85,000 dwellers were allowed to remain in 16 urban kampongs designated as 'tolerated attap areas' (see Table 3.5). This move, which aimed to provide cheap housing for the low-income group, was a political decision undertaken against the opposition of the SIT.¹⁵⁹ Dwellings in these kampongs were mandated to meet the strict housing standards set by the Attap Dwellings Special Committee: a distance of 15 feet between walls of non-inflammable materials like brick or corrugated iron, or 25 feet for inflammable materials; a concrete floor and drain, and corrugated iron wallings for the kitchen as a fire precaution.¹⁶⁰ In 1957, the authorities admitted that the original purpose of designating these areas as 'tolerated' had been lost, with 'racketeers' moving into the kampongs to build 'barrack-type wooden houses', and decided that the settlements 'be sterilised' and

¹⁵⁵ SIT 808/50, Report by George Pepler titled 'Attap Dwellings on Land Likely to be Required for Permanent Forms of Development in the City Area During the Next Five Years', 26 Jul 1952.

¹⁵⁶ HB 1013/50, Memo by the Chief Planning Officer, Diagnostic Survey Team, 17 Oct 1954.

¹⁵⁷ Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey* (Singapore: Printed at Government Printing Office, 1955), pp. 26-28.

¹⁵⁸ Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey*, p. 51.

¹⁵⁹ HB 477/53, Notes of a Discussion on the Improvement of Kampongs, 7 Mar 1957.

¹⁶⁰ HB 477/53, Notes of a Discussion on a) Control of Unauthorised Buildings and b) Improvement of Kampongs, 14 Nov 1957.

that no further building be permitted until a layout had been prepared in consultation with the SIT.¹⁶¹ In the following year, plans for the construction of spine roads and main drains were prepared for Radin Mas, Heap Guan San, Geylang Serai, and Wak Tanjong.¹⁶² However, in January 1959, the SIT found that ‘no control was being exercised and haphazard building was taking place’, dooming ‘the likelihood of ever clearing these areas’.¹⁶³

The vast majority of the settlements were categorised as ‘insanitary kampongs’. As highlighted in Table 3.4, it was felt that ‘[l]iving conditions in these areas are very bad’, which could ‘only be rendered healthy by a planned programme of clearance and rebuilding’. The most densely-populated kampongs near the City, like Tiong Bahru, Bukit Ho Swee, Kampong Soopoo, and parts of the Kallang Basin, considered to be ‘in so bad a general condition’, were marked for clearance.¹⁶⁴ The Master Plan estimated the removal of 3,200 wooden houses and rehousing of 22,400 persons in SIT housing in the next five years, including 600 dwellings at Kallang Basin and Bendemeer Road, with a further 32,500 kampong dwellers to be displaced within ten years.¹⁶⁵ In the urban districts (Table 3.6), except for the state-administered Malay Settlement, the kampong population was to be drastically slashed to make way for permanent housing, schools, public open spaces, and community buildings. The Master Plan sought, finally, to physically restore the social-environmental margin. In place of the ‘Black Belt’ of wooden dwellings on the urban fringe, it envisaged a ‘Green Belt’ of ‘open space around the City to limit its spread’.¹⁶⁶

The Plan had immense implications for Bukit Ho Swee. It foresaw a total transformation of Tiong Bahru district and marked out different zones of land use. Its wooden house population of 38,800, as Table 3.7 shows, were to be completely

¹⁶¹ HB 477/53, Notes of a Discussion on the Improvement of Kampongs, 7 Mar 1957.

¹⁶² SIT, *Annual Report 1958*, pp. 24-25.

¹⁶³ HB 16/59, Notes of a Meeting of Officers to Consider Housing Policy, 16 Jan 1959.

¹⁶⁴ Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey*, p. 26; HB 925/54, Memo from Chief Planning Officer, Diagnostic Survey Team, to Acting Chief Architect, SIT, 15 Nov 1954.

¹⁶⁵ SIT 808/50, Appendix A of Report by George Pepler, ‘Attap Dwellings on Land Likely to be Required for Permanent Forms of Development in the City Area During the Next Five Years’, 26 Jul 1952.

¹⁶⁶ *Singapore, The Better Future*, p. 7; Teo Siew Eng, ‘Planning Principles in Pre- and Post-Planning Singapore’, *The Town Planning Review*, 63 (2), 1992, p. 168.

cleared out for permanent housing for more than 100,000 people, with thirteen primary and four secondary schools, to be built by 1972.¹⁶⁷ The factories and shops along Havelock Road and the sawmills and warehouses of Covent Garden were permitted to remain. However, the wooden houses of Bukit Ho Swee, Or Kio Tau, Hong Lim Pa Sat, and Si Kah Teng were to be demolished and in most cases replaced by permanent housing, which was also to be built on Ma Kau Thiong. The cemetery would also have a primary school and an area of open space, as would Si Kah Teng. The Master Planners firmly supported the building of multi-storey housing on disused Chinese cemeteries and hilly ground.¹⁶⁸ Factories and wooden houses in the developed area between Beo Lane and Bukit Ho Swee [road] were to make way for permanent housing, a primary school and community buildings.¹⁶⁹ The clearance of Bukit Ho Swee and Tiong Bahru, as shown in Table 3.8, ranked high in the deliberations of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party, which worked closely with the Diagnostic Survey Team. In October 1956, the SIT already showed an interest in erecting housing on Ma Kau Thiong.¹⁷⁰ In May 1957, the Trust concluded that the cemetery was ‘excellent building ground’ without the need for expensive foundations for twelve 5-storey blocks, totalling 880 one-room flats, for more than 3,500 persons.¹⁷¹ The cemetery, to the SIT, held the key to the development of the entire locality. The Trust believed that if SIT housing could be built at the site, it would be more likely to succeed in clearing Covent Garden, which was nearby and where an improvement scheme was envisaged.¹⁷² By the end of the year, the government had acquired one lot on the site.¹⁷³ The plan, however, was shelved in September 1958 due to the cost of securing road access to the cemetery. The Trust, however, underlined that the site was suitable for emergency housing ‘if and when a programme of emergency housing was adopted’.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁷ Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey*, p. 57.

¹⁶⁸ SIT 808/50, Memo from Acting Manager, SIT, to George Pepler, 29 Jul 1952; and Notes by George Pepler, ‘Attap Dwellings on Land Likely to be Required for Permanent Forms of Development in the City Area During the Next Five Years’, 29 Jul 1952.

¹⁶⁹ Singapore, *Master Plan Atlas* (Singapore: Government Survey Department, 1958), revised edition, Town Map Sheets 1/209, 1/210, 1/229, 1/230.

¹⁷⁰ SIT 842/52, Memo from Senior Planner, Planning Division, SIT, to Chief Planner, Planning Control, SIT, 5 Oct 1956.

¹⁷¹ HB 932/57, Memo from Planning Adviser, SIT, to Senior Planner, Development Control, 28 May 1958; and Memo from Assistant Architect, SIT, to Chief Architect, SIT, 26 Aug 1957; HB 244/50, Memo from Chairman, SIT, to PS, MLGLH, 12 Jun 1957.

¹⁷² HB 932/57, Memo from Chairman, SIT, to PS, MLGLH, 31 Oct 1957.

¹⁷³ HB 932/57, Memo from Acting Deputy Commissioner of Lands to Chairman, SIT, 18 Dec 1957.

¹⁷⁴ HB 932/57, Minutes of Trust meeting, 29 Sep 1958.

Table 3.3: Distribution of Population under the Master Plan between 1953 and 1972

1953	
<i>Central Planning Area</i>	
Population satisfactorily housed	190,900
Population affected by redevelopment	150,000
Total	340,900
<i>Urban Planning Area</i>	
Population satisfactorily housed in permanent dwellings	306,700
Attap population affected by rehousing	161,000
Attap population not affected by rehousing	85,000
Total	552,700
<i>Rural Planning Area</i>	
Attap population	150,000
Population in permanent homes	70,000
Total	220,500
Population not specifically allocated to particular areas	6,700
Grand Total	1,120,800

1972	
<i>Central Planning Area</i>	
Population in permanent homes	290,000
<i>Urban Planning Area</i>	
Population in permanent homes	852,400
Population in attap settlement	148,000
Total	1,000,400
<i>Rural Planning Area</i>	
Population in Woodlands New Town	80,000
Population in Bulim New Town	85,000
Population in Yio Chu Kang New Town	35,000
Population elsewhere	120,500
Population in attap settlement	347,500
Total	668,000
Grand Total	1,958,400

Source: Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey* (1955), pp. 27-28.

Table 3.4: Redistribution of Attap Population under the Master Plan

<i>Urban Planning Area</i>	
Existing attap population	246,000
Less attap population displaced	161,000
Attap population on good sites ('tolerated attap areas')	85,000
Add new planned attap settlements (resettlement areas)	63,000*
Total future attap population	148,000
Net displacement from Urban Planning Area	246,000 - 148,000 = 98,000
<i>Rural Area</i>	
Existing attap population	150,000
Add attap population displaced from urban area	78,000*
Add natural increase of attap population	100,000*
Total future attap population	328,000

* All these persons will require new attap dwellings.

Source: Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey* (1955), p. 27.

Table 3.5: Tolerated Attap Areas

Kampong	Acres	Existing Population	Future No. of Families
Heap Guan San	65.85	3,293	1,313
Radin Mas	66.82	2,673	2,003
Geylang Serai (Malay Farm)	285.06	7,127	12,823
Bukit Arang	103.80	5,605	1,661
Bartley Road	94.21	5,087	1,507
Chantek	147.65	6,792	3,540
Bukit Theresa	65.86	2,634	1,972
Woodleigh	4.42	186	122
Kallang Pudding	39.17	2,546	191
Bedok	59.33	3,856	295
Paya Lebar	438.40	23,673	7,015
Tampenis	60.03	3,242	958
Serangoon	132.74	7,168	2,121
Jalan Eunos	222.98	5,574	10,029
MacPherson Road South	193.34	12,567	964
Wak Tanjong	136.38	3,410	6,131
Total (to nearest thousand)	2,116.04	95,000	53,000

Source: HB 722/55, Memorandum by D. H. Komlosy (Planning Adviser, SIT), 22 December 1955.

Table 3.6: Selected Clearance Areas

Kampong	No. of families
Queenstown	210
Kampong Henderson	122
MacPherson Road (S)	377
Toa Payoh	780
First Settlement (Master Plan)	500
Henderson Road (Incinerator Site)	97
Abattoir Site	174
Kampong Silat/Tiong Bahru	3,750
Kampong Bugis	320
Kampong Soopoo	280
Henderson Road	400
Bukit Ho Swee	1,670
Total	8,680

Source: Singapore, *Report of the Land Clearance & Resettlement Working Party* (1956), pp. 14-15.

Table 3.7: Urban Planning Districts in the Master Plan, 1955

District	Date	Population			Schools (acres)	Public Open Space (acres)	Community Buildings (acres)
		Temporary	Permanent	Total			
Tiong Bahru	1953	38,800	59,600	98,400	18.3	6.7	0.8
	1972	--	101,650	101,650	85.1	43.4	11.5
Telok Blangah	1953	10,100	8,700	18,800	27.3	--	0.5
	1972	9,400	15,800	25,200	47.4	159.6	3.3
Orchard Road	1953	2,500	51,500	54,000	36.3	36.9	0.7
	1972	--	84,650	84,650	93.8	57.9	11.0
Toa Payoh	1953	25,180	38,820	64,000	69.1	6.5	0.5
	1972	2,500	128,850	131,350	182.8	129.7	5.5
Queens-town	1953	9,400	600	10,000	--	1.4	0.1
	1972	300	77,550	77,850	106.1	84.2	10.1
Whitley	1953	4,500	5,000	9,500	13.0	--	--
	1972	1,500	16,700	18,200	27.8	22.5	0.8
Dunearn	1953	2,740	960	3,700	1.9	--	--
	1972	950	15,200	16,150	58.7	5.0	1.0
Holland	1953	10,200	4,000	14,200	83.7	2.2	1.2
	1972	22,300	41,000	63,300	130.3	22.2	8.8
Tanglin	1953	1,200	21,200	22,400	--	74.0	0.2
	1972	--	39,750	39,750	13.4	74.0	0.2
Pasir Panjang	1953	5,800	4,100	9,900	8.7	--	0.2
	1972	4,350	8,500	12,850	18.5	22.0	6.4
Bukit Timah	1953	5,800	6,200	12,000	3.8	--	0.2
	1972	18,500	36,400	54,900	62.3	170.5	8.2
Thomson	1953	5,500	--	5,500	--	1.0	--
	1972	500	28,350	28,850	27.2	99.7	6.7
Paya Lebar	1953	45,600	12,600	58,200	27.0	1.2	0.3
	1972	41,800	64,200	106,000	124.2	46.2	8.0
Aljunied Road	1953	12,700	11,400	24,100	53.9	--	--
	1972	3,800	49,200	53,000	102.4	16.1	8.8
Geylang	1953	50,000	75,300	125,300	108.7	18.8	0.7
	1972	19,750	124,400	144,150	187.3	258.9	13.8
Malay Settlement	1953	17,000	5,700	22,700	4.6	1.2	--
	1972	21,500	21,000	42,550	50.9	21.2	7.0

Source: Singapore, *Master Plan: Report of Survey* (1955), pp. 56-64.

Table 3.8: Clearance Areas by Priority, 1955

Name of Kampong	Acres	Total Dwellings	Total Population	Priority
Kampong Silat	171.04	4,160	22,404	2 & 3
Tiong Bahru				
Mount Washington				
Kampong Bugis	15.62	370	1,924	3
Kampong Soopoo	7.36	250	1,662	2
Henderson Road	203.01	N.A.	2,408	3
Selomai			1,548	
Alexandra			6,720	
Carey Road	56.26	1,950	10,018	3
Bukit Ho Swee				1
Beo Lane				1

Source: HB 722/55, Interim Report of the Working Party formed to Consider a Report on the 'Squatter Problem', undated, c. 1955.

Resistance and Mobilisation

When faced with eviction, the dwellers of unauthorised housing were not afraid to defend their homes. Demolition provoked such strong, spontaneous resistance that one Chinese newspaper described the social response to it as 'a lion's roar from the oppressed people'.¹⁷⁵ This collective reaction was a marked departure from the passive resistance which had largely typified relations between the state and Chinese society up to the 1930s.¹⁷⁶ The people involved in the contestation, in some way, all stood on the periphery of colonial society – wooden house dwellers, women, youths (both Chinese school students and gangsters), and leftwing politicians and social activists. Among the resistant wooden house dwellers were migrant families from Malaya who had fled the Federation to avoid the 'New Villages' resettlement programme.¹⁷⁷ The prominence of women in the resistance against eviction underlined their important role as home-makers and local workers. The SIT found that most residents had either 'political backing or the backing of hooligans or gangsters', and that demolition was so fraught with difficulty that even the presence of policemen, who were meant to merely observe and not to interfere with the demolition process except to prevent a breach of the peace, was often

¹⁷⁵ NYSP, 1 May 1954.

¹⁷⁶ Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment*, 2nd edition (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003), p. 20.

¹⁷⁷ A4231/1956/Singapore, Despatch from Australian Commissioner to Minister for External Affairs, Jul 1956.

insufficient.¹⁷⁸ Secret societies protected their turfs and constituents against hostile intruders and physically challenged demolition squads on the spot, while City Councillors, Legislative Assembly members and activists sought to block demolition orders through administrative channels.¹⁷⁹ Although demolition squads were ordered not to proceed if they were obstructed, in order to allow the SIT to take the necessary legal action against the occupants, tension and conflict invariably broke out at sites of eviction.

In January 1953, the SIT's Deputy Lands Manager, attempting to demolish several wooden houses at Nile Road, was struck several times by the landlord's wife. When he returned on another day to complete the task, she threatened him with a brick, while the surrounding crowd became extremely agitated.¹⁸⁰ In July, the Acting Lands Manager of the SIT attempted to demolish three unauthorised wooden houses at Geylang Lorong 27 built on Trust land and occupied by two families who had refused to leave. When he led a demolition squad of three Lands Inspectors, 12 labourers and an escort of two police constables to the site,

a hostile crowd of about forty people gathered. The two PCs were unable to disperse the crowd. The Indian family moved out [in] about fifteen minutes but the Chinese family refused to move...certain members of the crowd adopted a threatening attitude....I decided to withdraw to Aljunied Road with all personnel as there was an immediate possibility of a breach of the peace.

Subsequently, Joo Chiat police station sent a patrol car to the area,

The officer in charge of the patrol car interrogated the obstructive family during which time a crowd of fifty persons or more gathered.

In view of the hostile attitude adopted by certain members of the

¹⁷⁸ HB 364/58, Memo from Lands Inspector to Acting Lands Officer, 28 May 1958.

¹⁷⁹ SFP, 26 May 1958.

¹⁸⁰ SIT 9/53, Complaint Made by Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, before the Police Magistrate, Jan 1953. The Manager called the police who seized the landlady and another female tenant for 'inciting bystanders'.

crowd he decided to ask for further support. By this time the whole area was aroused.

Senior officers from the police station and later a riot squad descended upon the scene before the situation was finally brought under control, with the Chinese family removed and the buildings demolished.¹⁸¹

In 1955, when police protection was temporarily withdrawn, the SIT still sought to remove three wooden structures on Crown land in Toa Payoh. Near the end of the demolition, the house owner, his son and an occupier had become 'somewhat agitated', and the son struck the Lands Inspector with a four-foot metal bar, whereupon the assault was joined by the other two. The three men were subsequently convicted and fined.¹⁸² Three years later, gangsters at Henderson Road successfully prevented a demolition attempt, while the Lands Manager and other officials were also assaulted in other kampongs, in all cases in the presence of two constables.¹⁸³ Demolition orders became part of 'a dangerous process', with the SIT's Lands Inspectors facing on-site intimidation, whether 'written, verbal or, even physical'.¹⁸⁴ Unauthorised construction and occupation of wooden housing continued to increase that year through to 1959. In September 1959, after the general elections were over, the Resettlement Department, with sufficient police protection, demolished a number of unauthorised structures in Kampong Henderson and elsewhere. This, however, did not have, as was initially declared, the desired effect of discouraging further unauthorised building.¹⁸⁵

Urban kampong dwellers did not stand alone against a concerted policy of dishousing. Politicians who recognised the importance of a political mass base realised, as Ho Kok Hoe, City Councillor for River Valley surmised, that 'there were

¹⁸¹ HB 659/53, Report on the Demolition of Three Timber and Attap Houses on Singapore Improvement Trust Land at Lorong 27, Geylang, on 17 Jul 1953 by Acting Lands Manager, 22 Jul 1953.

¹⁸² HB 659/53, Report on the Demolition of Three Structures at Toa Payoh on 26 Aug 1955 by Deputy Collector of Land Revenue, 31 Aug 1955.

¹⁸³ HB 364/58, Memo from Lands Inspector to Acting Lands Officer, 28 May 1958.

¹⁸⁴ SIT, *Annual Report 1958*, p. 35; HB 364/58, Memo from Lands Manager, SIT, to Acting Deputy Secretary, SIT, 8 May 1958.

¹⁸⁵ SIT, *Annual Report 1957*, pp. 28, 30, 37; SIT, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 27.

a lot of votes there'.¹⁸⁶ The Singapore Attap Dwellers' Association (SADA), founded in 1952, was politically prominent in the early 1950s. It was closely linked to the Labour Front government which was in power between 1955 and 1959. Its President, Mak Pak Shee, was the party's Assemblyman for Geylang and, as a member of the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party, he advocated the rejection of the term 'squatter'.¹⁸⁷ In October 1953, the association had an estimated 2,000 members, representing 10,000 persons. While assuring the government that it would 'never be its policy to hold up development in this Colony', it sought to protect attap dwellers from eviction by 'unscrupulous landlords or land speculators' desiring to develop land without due compensation or the provision of alternative housing.¹⁸⁸ The SIT commented favourably that SADA was led by 'astute politicians',¹⁸⁹ with the association and the authorities cooperating 'in all action for resettlement'.¹⁹⁰ In April 1953, the association proposed to name a resettlement area in Upper Aljunied Road 'Kampong McNeice' as 'a mark of appreciation' to T. P. F. McNeice, President of the City Council and Chairman of the SIT.¹⁹¹ The association worked on the basis that 'the squatters were morally entitled to certain rights' in negotiating rehousing terms in the Queenstown project and in seeking similar rehousing terms and fair rates of compensation for farmers in the Jurong resettlement area.¹⁹²

The greatest political advances into the urban kampongs, however, were made by the PAP, the most progressive political party in the 1950s. Its aim, as top leader Lee Kuan Yew explained later, was to bridge 'the gap to the Chinese-educated world – a world teeming with vitality, dynamism and revolution'.¹⁹³ Penetrating the 'black areas' which lay outside official regulation was a key strategy in the PAP's efforts to mobilise the lower-income, Chinese-speaking population.

¹⁸⁶ Author's interview with Ho Kok Hoe, 6 Feb 2007.

¹⁸⁷ In the 1952 City Council elections, Mak had run as an Independent in East Ward but had lost.

¹⁸⁸ Petition by SADA to Governor John Nicoll, 12 Oct 1953, Appendix V, Horsley, Resettlement of a Community, p. 183.

¹⁸⁹ SIT, *Annual Report 1954*, p. 14.

¹⁹⁰ Horsley, Resettlement of a Community, p. 123. Horsley was the wife of J. A. T. Horsley, Resettlement Engineer in the SIT and had interviewed Mak Pak Shee for her dissertation.

¹⁹¹ SIT 808/4/50, Letter by Mak Pak Shee to Secretary of City Council, 20 Apr 1953.

¹⁹² SIT 993/50, Lands Division Annual Report 1955; HB 1018/12/50, Notes of a Meeting to Discuss the Clearance of Queenstown, 10 Jul 1954.

¹⁹³ Lee Kuan Yew, *Towards Socialism: The Battle for Merger*, Vol. 5 (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1962), pp. 10-11.

Following the revival of leftwing politics in 1954, the SADA was superseded by two powerful organisations closely-associated with the PAP left and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) underground: the Singapore Farmers' Association (SFA) and the Singapore Wooden House Dwellers' Association (SWHDA), both formed in 1955. In recent years, scholars have re-evaluated the place of the political left in Singapore's history and questioned the power of the 'Communist united front' in local politics.¹⁹⁴ While there was communist influence at the executive level of both organisations to a 'greater or lesser extent',¹⁹⁵ the SFA and SWHDA were firmly anti-colonial. As one activist explained, 'the purpose was to bring about the social consciousness of the people, raise their understanding of politics and unite them for the cause of the anti-colonial struggle'.¹⁹⁶

The SFA and SWHDA sought to engage the wooden house population which, because of its low levels of employment and education, was not easily organised into labour or student unions. Their political work consequently crossed rural and urban boundaries. They were politically influential among low-income Chinese farmers and semi-urban and urban dwellers in Potong Pasir, Bedok, Sembawang, Punggol, Toa Payoh, Paya Lebar, and Lorong Tai Seng. Lim Chin Kok, President of both the SFA and the leading labour union, the Singapore Factory and Shop Workers' Union, could also reach out to urban workers living in wooden houses.¹⁹⁷ What differentiated the leftwing associations from SADA was their anti-colonial stance and transparency in upholding the interests of kampong dwellers. The SFA and SWHDA were not necessarily obstructive in representing wooden house dwellers against landlords trying to evict them but 'the tight control' the associations

¹⁹⁴ See T. N. Harper, 'Lim Chin Siong and the "Singapore Story"', in Tan Jing Quee and K.S. Jomo (eds), *Comet in Our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History* (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 2001), pp. 1-56; Liew Kai Khiun, 'The Anchor and the Voice of 10,000 Waterfront Workers: Jamit Singh in the Singapore Story (1954-63)', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 35 (3), 2004, pp. 459-78; Liu Hong & Wong Sin-Kiong, *Singapore Chinese Society in Transition: Business, Politics, and Socio-economic Change, 1945-1965* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), C. J. W.-L. Wee, 'The Vanquished: Lim Chin Siong and a Progressivist National Narrative', in Lam Peng Er and Kevin Y. L. Tan. (eds), *Lee's Lieutenants: Singapore's Old Guard* (St. Leonard's: Allen & Unwin, 1999); and Michael Fernandez & Loh Kah Seng, 'The Left-Wing Trade Unions in Singapore, 1945-1970', in Carl Trocki & Michael Barr (eds), *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Postwar Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, forthcoming).

¹⁹⁵ Author's interview with Poh Soon Seng, 19 Sep 2006.

¹⁹⁶ Author's interview with C. C. Chin, 24 Nov 2006.

¹⁹⁷ Author's interview with Chan Chiaw Thor, 23 Sep 2006.

had over the dwellers was considered significant.¹⁹⁸ Chan Chiaw Thor, secretary of the SFA and regarded as ‘the single most influential political figure in the rural areas’,¹⁹⁹ maintained that ‘we worked hard to interview the farmers and understand their problems. We raised other people’s problems to them and how we helped to solve them, and the dwellers felt happy hearing them’.²⁰⁰ In turn, the rural dwellers often supported the activists en masse, as a community; this was the case, according to Chio Cheng Thun, an activist in Lorong Tai Seng where he also lived, because the residents placed much emphasis on community feeling and relationships.²⁰¹ By early 1956, the SFA and SWHDA had a membership of 5,000 each,²⁰² while the SFA was already more broadly based than SADA and better organised, with a ‘larger number of representatives educated and briefed to act on their own initiative within the framework of a general policy’.²⁰³

The activists levelled the political playing field between low-income, Chinese-speaking kampong dwellers and the colonial regime and landowners. They provided legal advice on the dwellers’ behalf, and drafted letters to the authorities and landowners on house construction and repair as well as stating their position on eviction. Where, previously, kampong dwellers customarily had to submit to the demands of removal or offer bribes to officials, they could now effectively articulate and defend their own interests in the legal language of administrative authority. As Poh Soon Seng, an SFA member and later General Secretary of the Singapore Country People’s Association, observed, the dwellers used to be intimidated upon receiving legal letters ordering them to move out within a short time:

The landowners had lawyers write letters, sounding like an emperor, telling the tenants to move out by this date, and there was no mention of compensation. The residents, being ignorant, were frightened.

¹⁹⁸ A4231/1956/Singapore, Despatch from Australian Commissioner to Minister for External Affairs, Jul 1956; author’s interview with Chan Chiaw Thor, 23 Sep 2006.

¹⁹⁹ RG 59, 746F.00/9-1561, Despatch from US Consul General to Department of State titled ‘Left-Wingers in Rural Areas Desert the PAP’, 15 Sep 1961.

²⁰⁰ Author’s interview with Chan Chiaw Thor, 23 Sep 2006.

²⁰¹ Chio was a member of the leftwing Singapore Rural Residents’ Association and the General Secretary of its 5th Branch at Tampines-Paya Lebar. Author’s interview with Chio Cheng Thun, 7 Mar 2007.

²⁰² Lee Ting Hui, *The Open United Front: The Communist Struggle in Singapore, 1954-1966* (Singapore: South Seas Society, 1996), pp. 94, 131.

²⁰³ SIT 993/50 Vol. IV, Lands Division Monthly Report Jun 1955.

With an association to represent them, they were no longer afraid and so landowners couldn't simply evict them.²⁰⁴

Indeed the political relationship was much reversed, as local officials and landowners, confronted with organised opposition, became far more wary of the wooden house dwellers.²⁰⁵ The authorities found that wooden house dwellers were 'even more intractable to resettlement than people in central areas', because 'the large numbers of...people living in attap dwellings make them a political force of some magnitude and the banding together of such persons into protective associations are discouragements to rapid clearance'.²⁰⁶

A key area of social and political contention was the implementation of the Master Plan. The SFA, in referring to the Plan, criticised slum clearance as a typically 'tragic affair' which failed to provide the affected dwellers with affordable alternative accommodation. Resettled farmers, it contended, were also not given adequate compensation for the loss of their houses, crops and farming equipment,²⁰⁷ especially as considerable labour and material had been expended to develop the land'.²⁰⁸ In 1956, when the SIT sought to remove 27 farmers in Jurong who were members of the SFA in order to establish a resettlement area, the majority of the occupiers went to the association in 'general opposition to the use of any of the land'. The SIT consequently found the association 'not prepared to consider any compromise'.²⁰⁹ The SFA maintained that it steadfastly opposed the mass eviction as bringing the farmers 'untold hardship'.²¹⁰

The political history of Singapore has dwelt almost exclusively on political parties and the labour and student movements. The SFA and SWHDA were, however, also crucial in helping to forge a potent alliance of workers, students and

²⁰⁴ Author's interview with Poh Soon Seng, 19 Sep 2006.

²⁰⁵ Author's interview with Poh Soon Seng, 19 Sep 2006.

²⁰⁶ HB 477/53, Report titled 'Housing' by the Planning Coordination Committee, undated, c. 1959.

²⁰⁷ *Petir*, Jun 1956, pp. 4-5, 7.

²⁰⁸ SIT 760/18/54, Letter from General Secretary, SFA, to Lands Divisions, SIT, 14 Jul 1956.

²⁰⁹ SIT 760/22/54, Memo from Deputy Lands Manager to PS, MLGLH, 3 Sep 1956; CO 1030/241, Monthly Intelligence Report, 8 Sep-12 Oct 1956..

²¹⁰ SIT 760/22/54, Letter from General Affairs Secretary, SFA, to Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, 3 Aug 1956; and Letter from General Affairs Secretary, SFA, to Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, 16 Aug 1956.

wooden house dwellers against colonial rule. In the mid-1950s, kampong dwellers frequently appeared at sites of industrial action, where workers belonging to leftwing unions were challenging employers over the right to unionise, better wages and working conditions. The kampong dwellers brought the strikers a steady supply of meat, vegetables and eggs,²¹¹ underscoring how poultry rearers and market gardeners pragmatically helped to sustain militant unionism against the threat of unfair dismissal by hostile employers. The local, semi-rural kampong economy consequently came to play a little-seen but vitally important part in the politics of the anti-colonial struggle.

By April 1956, the SFA's membership had grown to 6,000, with its cultural activities like the Mid-Autumn Festival celebrations gaining popularity in the kampongs.²¹² In the May Day speech that year, Lim Chin Kok called for unity among labour, students and farmers in the struggle for independence but especially against the colonial state's oppression of Chinese students.²¹³ In July, the SFA and SWHDA, jointly with the 'Middle Road' group of leftwing unions,²¹⁴ supported a PAP call for a united front for 'Merdeka' ('independence'). At the meeting, Lim Chin Siong also expressed sympathy for secret society members, attributing their existence to unemployment caused by the colonial system.²¹⁵ In August, SFA and SWHDA members supported the left's 'anti-yellow culture' campaign against colonial and 'Western' values and practices.²¹⁶ In September, when Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock began a massive crackdown on leftwing leaders and 'Communist front organisations', he perceived wooden house dwellers as being part of the 'Communist united front'.²¹⁷ The Special Branch feared that 'a large number of Chinese workers, peasants and students in Singapore support [the] PAP, and this group, infiltrated by Communist elements, is likely to be the spearhead of

²¹¹ Author's interview with Poh Soon Seng, 19 Sep 2006.

²¹² CO 1030/240, Report of the Singapore Local Intelligence Committee, 12-25 April 1956.

²¹³ CO 1030/240, Report of the Singapore Local Intelligence Committee, 25 April-8 May 1956.

²¹⁴ So called because the offices of the leftwing unions, particularly the Singapore Factory and Shop Workers' Union and the Singapore Bus Workers' Union, were located at Middle Road.

²¹⁵ CO 1030/240, Report of the Singapore Local Intelligence Committee, 4-26 July 1956.

²¹⁶ CO 1030/248, Malaya: Monthly Emergency & Political Report, 15 Aug to 16 Sep 1956; CO 1030/241, Monthly Intelligence Report, 10-23 Aug 1956.

²¹⁷ CO 1030/187, Text of a Speech by Lim Yew Hock Made at the Legislative Assembly on 5 Nov 1956; Singapore, *The Communist Threat in Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1957), pp. 1-2. Lim planned to use the crackdown to show the government in Britain that he could act decisively against the 'communist threat' prior to leading a delegation to London in March-April 1957, where he hoped to persuade the British to grant full self-government to Singapore.

disturbances'.²¹⁸ Lim Yew Hock began by detaining seven leading leftists, including Lim Chin Kok, and banned two leftwing organisations.²¹⁹ The SFA and Middle Road unions immediately released a joint statement condemning the arrests and demanded the release of the detainees.²²⁰ The SWHDA similarly declared that the 6,000 families who were its members, comprising 40,000 people, opposed the unlawful detention and demanded that the leaders be tried in an open court or else be unconditionally released.²²¹ Chan Chiaw Thor was part of a delegation which went to see Lim Yew Hock on 21 September to demand an explanation for the arrests.²²² In early October, when Chinese students staged sit-ins at the Chinese High School and Chung Cheng High School in protest against the arrests, the SFA, together with other leftwing unions, provided financial, material and moral support for the politically-motivated students.²²³

Riots broke out on 25 October across the island, with the worst fighting taking place in Bukit Timah, Kallang, Geylang, and the Central Area. The SFA and SWHDA allegedly supported the violence, particularly in the rural areas, and were accused of planning to burn down two English schools and a police station in Jurong and attack the Bukit Timah police station.²²⁴ Both associations were deregistered in November after the riots ended,²²⁵ and seven members were arrested during the crackdown.²²⁶ The 1956 riots, and other instances of mass violence in the 1950s, have customarily been interpreted within the framework of the 'Communist united front' master narrative, without sufficient regard given for the thinking of the ordinary people who were involved. The transformation of a large part of Singapore's population from one which superficially submitted to colonial authority

²¹⁸ FO 1091/46, Report titled 'Internal Security Appreciation – Singapore and the Federation of Malaya' by Chief of Staff, Malaya Command, 17 Apr 1956.

²¹⁹ The two banned associations were the Singapore Women's Federation and Singapore Brass Musical Gong Society.

²²⁰ *NYSP*, 21 Sep 1956 and 22 Sep 1956.

²²¹ *NYSP*, 23 Sep 1956.

²²² *ST*, 22 Sep 1956.

²²³ CO 1030/578, Report on the Riots in Singapore, October 1956.

²²⁴ CO 1030/241, Monthly Intelligence Report, 13 Oct-30 Nov 1956.

²²⁵ Former members of the SFA, however, deny the allegations. They maintain that while individual members could have been involved, the organisation firmly adopted a constitutional approach and did not plan such attacks. Poh Soon Seng maintained that 'even the people behind the scenes, the MCP underground, did not intend to create large-scale riots'. Author's interviews with Chan Chiaw Thor, 15 Sep 2006 & 23 Sep 2006; and Poh Soon Seng, 19 Sep 2006.

²²⁶ CO 1030/187, Despatch from Governor of Singapore to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 23 Jan 1957.

(but passively contested it) to another which overtly challenged the British establishment was not primarily due to manipulation by MCP cadres but rather, the prevailing social and economic circumstances. In the words of George Rude, wooden house dwellers, like their late eighteenth century French counterparts, 'far from being mere passive instruments, absorbed and adapted the slogans and ideas of the political groups contending for power'.²²⁷ Pulling together the threads of 1950s anti-colonial politics and the depth of oppression suffered by the ordinary people, it is striking how *ordinary* and *rational* the riots in fact were. Whether the violence was triggered off by communist or government provocateurs, the wooden house dwellers, workers and students were struggling, in Arlette Farge's words, for order, not against it, for justice and honour, 'giving shape and form to what is lacking and what it is that has to be overcome'.²²⁸

Following the riots, the MCP sought to establish a new organisation in 'outlying remote areas'.²²⁹ SFA and SWHDA leaders who had survived the Lim Yew Hock cull were still able to maintain some control over their former members.²³⁰ Within months of the proscription against the SFA and SWHDA, many of their members had joined the Singapore Country People's Association (SCPA) and the Singapore Rural Residents' Association (SRRA).²³¹ According to C. C. Chin, a member of both associations, MCP cadres or members of the leftwing Anti-British League dominated key positions in both associations and their branches.²³² In 1960, the newly-elected executive committee of the SRRA was comprised largely of suspected communists and former political detainees; its Chairman, Sim Bok Huan, and another committee member were former members of SWHDA and the SFA respectively.²³³ The membership of the SCPA and SRRA had risen rapidly to

²²⁷ George Rude, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 196.

²²⁸ Arlette Farge, *Fragile Lives: Violence, Power and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 260.

²²⁹ Singapore, *The Communist Threat in Singapore*, p. 3.

²³⁰ CO 1030/241, Monthly Intelligence Report, Dec 1956.

²³¹ Lee, *The Open United Front*, p. 137; Singapore Legislative Assembly, *Official Report of the Select Committee on the Societies (Amendment) Bill* (Singapore: Government Printer Office, 1960), p. B4. According to Poh Soon Seng, the SCPA was originally established by a Labour Front politician and the SRRA by a Democratic Party member. Author's interview with Poh Soon Seng, 19 Sep 2006.

²³² Author's interview with C. C. Chin, 24 Nov 2006.

²³³ FO 1091/107, Singapore Special Branch Intelligence Summary, Jul 1960.

2,500 and 3,000 respectively,²³⁴ and continued to do so after the PAP came to power in 1959. By the end of 1960, the SCPA had 5,000 members and seven district branches.²³⁵ Despite their names, both associations were open to residents of ‘Kampongs within the existing City Limits’.²³⁶ In engaging kampong dwellers, the SCPA and SRRA were keenly involved in their social life. They organised the young village men into crime patrols and helped the kampong dwellers to repair wooden houses, roads and bridges, clear drains and clean pig stys. They also ran sports, dance and singing events, sewing classes, kindergartens, and literacy classes for adolescents who did not attend school.²³⁷ The SRRA, for example, ran literacy classes in Lorong Tai Seng and Geylang Serai.²³⁸ Both associations were decidedly anti-colonial and their cultural and educational activities allegedly contained a ‘strong Chinese Communist flavour’.²³⁹ At a literacy class in Paya Lebar in 1960, a speaker critically discussed the implications of the Emergency Regulations in Malaya.²⁴⁰ Then in May 1960, the SCPA and SRRA formed a joint committee to formulate a common policy.²⁴¹ In February 1961, together with other leftwing organisations, they condemned the assassination of Congolese Premier Patrice Lumumba.²⁴²

While wooden house dwellers were being drawn directly into the anti-colonial struggle, the city administration was itself being transformed. This was testament to a pragmatic and determined PAP policy to mobilise the grassroots from the political margins as well as through official channels. In contesting the 1957 City

²³⁴ FO 1091/106, Singapore Intelligence Committee Report, 13-26 Aug 1959.

²³⁵ FO 1091/107, Singapore Special Branch Intelligence Summary, Dec 1960.

²³⁶ ME 481/58, Constitution of the Singapore Country People’s Association, 1958. In the Chinese names of the Singapore Country People’s Association, 乡村人民联合会, and the Singapore Rural Residents’ Association, 乡村住民联合会, 乡村 meant ‘village’.

²³⁷ Author’s interviews with C. C. Chin, 24 Nov 2006, and Chio Cheng Thun, 7 Mar 2007.

²³⁸ ME 1432/59, Memo from Education Officer, Registrar of Chinese Schools to Supernumerary Assistant Secretary, MOE, 12 Jan 1960.

²³⁹ RG 59, 746F.00/9-1561, Despatch from US Consul General to Department of State titled, ‘Left-Wingers in Rural Areas Desert the PAP’, 15 Sep 1961.

²⁴⁰ FO 1091/107, Singapore Special Branch Intelligence Summary, Feb 1960. The Emergency Regulations were introduced in Malaya and Singapore at the outbreak of the insurgency of the Malayan Communist party in June 1948 and authorised the detention of persons deemed to be internal security threats without trial for an indefinite period.

²⁴¹ FO 1091/107, Singapore Special Branch Intelligence Summary, May 1960.

²⁴² FO 1091/107, Singapore Special Branch Intelligence Summary, Feb 1961, Appendix E, 23 Feb 1961. Lumumba was widely-regarded as a fervent anti-colonialist and his assassination in controversial circumstances was rumoured to have been planned by the former Belgian colonial regime in the Congo and the United States.

Council elections, the party pledged to provide more standpipes and electricity and better kampong drainage and sanitation to wooden house dwellers.²⁴³ Significantly, housing was not mentioned, a sign that Mayor Ong Eng Guan and the party understood that the kampong dwellers wanted amenities, not ‘better housing’, which in practical terms meant eviction from their homes and more costly rentals.²⁴⁴ After the PAP’s victory in the elections, Ong, in proclaiming his ‘new kampong policy’, declared that ‘[t]he poorest sections of the people living in places like Chinatown, and those in the kampongs like Geylang or Kampong Silat...shall have first priority in our development programme’.²⁴⁵ Ong pledged to improve kampong roads for the passage of fire engines, build standpipes for the dwellers’ convenience, supply electricity, provide free standard architectural plans for erecting wooden houses, and establish maternity and infant welfare clinics and mobile clinics and dispensaries in the larger kampongs.²⁴⁶ In 1958, the Council installed 600 standpipes, more than six times the modest target (fifty) Ong had stated in his policy speech.²⁴⁷

The new policy had galvanised the Council into action. With the crucial 1959 general elections for full self-government beckoning, a flood of motions, mostly by non-PAP Councillors, ensued – to improve roads, drainage, sewage disposal, and street lighting, erect standpipes, supply electricity, provide adequate fire hydrants, and organise voluntary fire-fighting squads in the urban kampongs. In 1958, the Council agreed to install street lamps in Kampong Tiong Bahru, Bukit Ho Swee, Beo Lane, and Kampong Silat. More standpipes were installed in Kampong Tiong Bahru while Beo Lane was to be re-metalled.²⁴⁸ The stretch of Havelock Road from Delta Circus to the Pepsi Cola factory was widened in 1958, while a number of kampong roads were built or metalled, including roads at Kampong Silat, Potong Pasir, Boon Teck, and Kampong Tiong Bahru.²⁴⁹ In 1960, the City Council also

²⁴³ *Petir*, Dec 1957, p. 4.

²⁴⁴ Author’s interview with William S. W. Lim, 25 Oct 2006.

²⁴⁵ Speech by Ong Eng Guan, 30 Jun 1958, in CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1958*.

²⁴⁶ Speech by Ong Eng Guan, 6 Jan 1958, in CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1958*.

²⁴⁷ Speech by Ong Eng Guan, 30 Jun 1958, in CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1958*; CC, *Administration Report 1958*, p. 6.

²⁴⁸ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1958*, 30 May 1958, p. 479; 19 Nov 1958, p. 9; and *Minutes of Proceedings 1959*, 31 Mar 1959.

²⁴⁹ CC, *Administration Report 1958*, p. 21; CC, *Administration Report 1959*, p. 16; CC ED, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 3; CC, *Administration Report 1960*, p. 19.

approved schemes to supply electricity to a number of rural and urban kampongs.²⁵⁰ However, the ‘new kampong policy’ was not a complete success. The list of building and public works achievements only demonstrated how much more still had to be done. With the Council’s funds constrained under the Local Government Ordinance, many of the Councillors’ motions were not adopted, including improving kampong sanitation and obtaining proper building materials and skilled labour to repair kampong roads.²⁵¹ It was only *after* the Kampong Tiong Bahru fire in 1959 that a motion to provide sewerage to the kampong was adopted.²⁵² But motions to supply electricity and, more crucially, install water mains there were still not adopted. Just as importantly, the major interior roads, Beo Lane and Bukit Ho Swee [road], had not been re-metalled or widened by 1961. They were private roads and priority for this category of road was given to the Geylang Lorongs.²⁵³ The inaction in the Bukit Ho Swee locality was also testament to the inertia of politicians facing the sheer scale of the tasks which confronted them. Consequently, the City Council’s members and departments responsible for public works and building administration preferred the status quo to reforming past policies and processes as the money ran out. Officials, as Ho Kok Hoe explained, simply passed the buck.²⁵⁴

The PAP’s ability to penetrate the ‘black areas’ and mobilise low-income Chinese kampong dwellers was instrumental in its resounding victory in the 1959 general elections. The party won 43 out of 51 seats in the Legislative Assembly, securing 53% of the vote.²⁵⁵ Lee Kuan Yew emerged in triumph as the Prime Minister of the self-governing State of Singapore.²⁵⁶ The party’s ascendancy and the surge of anti-colonial politics in Singapore which went hand in hand also transformed the structure of the colonial civil administration. The SIT was to be

²⁵⁰ CC ED, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 22.

²⁵¹ Speeches by Ong Eng Guan, 30 Jun 1958 & 31 Jul 1958, in CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1958*.

²⁵² CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1959*, 30 Apr 1959, pp. 30-31.

²⁵³ CC ED, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 5.

²⁵⁴ Author’s interview with Ho Kok Hoe, 6 Feb 2007.

²⁵⁵ The PAP’s victory was testament to its success in mobilising the ground. In the 1959 elections, voting was made compulsory whereas it had been voluntary in the 1955 elections. The size of the electorate in 1959 was 587,000 people (compared to 300,000 in 1955), of whom more than 89% voted (53% in 1955). Former Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock’s Singapore People’s Alliance, which he established in late 1958, won only four seats in the 1959 elections.

²⁵⁶ Under the terms of the 1959 Constitution, the British colonial government retained the right to suspend the constitution in the event of an emergency and its control of defence and foreign relations. The elected government would have full control over internal matters, except internal security, which would come under a 7-member Internal Security Council, comprising 3 members from the British government, 3 from the Singapore government and 1 from the Federation of Malaya.

dissolved in 1960, with its housing and planning responsibilities transferred to two new agencies, the Housing and Development Board and the Planning Department, respectively. Similarly, the experiment in local government ended, as the PAP sought to centralise the government and bureaucratic machinery.²⁵⁷ The City Council was to be dismantled at the end of 1960, with its departments integrated into and coming under the control of various government ministries. Its housing-related responsibilities were transferred to the HDB, which was part of the newly-created Ministry of National Development, whose first head was the former Mayor, Ong Eng Guan. Lee Kuan Yew declared that the integration would benefit the Ministry more than any other ministry, by removing the duplication of work previously carried out by architects, engineers and technicians in the City Council, Public Works Department and the SIT.²⁵⁸

Bukit Ho Swee and Hong Lim Pa Sat

Urban kampong dwellers in the Bukit Ho Swee locality contributed substantially to the political climate and changes which shook 1950s Singapore society. Politics had come to the kampong, rather than the other way round. The ‘traditional notion of “law-abidingness”’ among low-income Chinese in Malaya and Singapore, as an official Australian document stated, did not amount to more than ‘keeping out of trouble and not interfering in matters not one’s immediate concern’.²⁵⁹ Without the aggressive political activism, kampong dwellers in Singapore would have typically been more complacently concerned with their livelihoods. Relationship with the government was perceived in strictly negative terms; as Tan Tiam Ho put it aptly, ‘We were more concerned with our families. Government, as long as we didn’t break the law, we would not bother with them’.²⁶⁰

The adults of Bukit Ho Swee gradually overcame their political apathy and voted for political change by the end of the 1950s. In the 1955 Legislative Assembly

²⁵⁷ PAP, *The Tasks Ahead: The PAP’s Five-Year Plan, 1959-1964*, Part 1 (Singapore: People’s Action Party, 1959), p. 28.

²⁵⁸ *ST*, 19 Sep 1959.

²⁵⁹ A4231/1949/Singapore, Despatch from Australian Commissioner for Malaya to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 16 Mar 1949.

²⁶⁰ Author’s interview with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007.

elections, when Bukit Ho Swee was part of Tiong Bahru ward, in a contest between two conservative candidates, the Democratic Party's William Tan Ah Lek narrowly defeated his Progressive Party opponent. The turnout was more telling: only 47% of the electorate voted.²⁶¹ In the 1957 City Council elections, the candidate of the newly-formed Workers' Party (led by David Marshall), John Cruz Corera, won 55% of the vote in Delta ward, comprising Bukit Ho Swee, against a rival from the ruling Labour Front government; the turnout was 37%. According to United States consulate analysts, Delta was 'another city division in one of the poorer parts of Singapore'; they saw in Corera's success the strength of the leftist vote and predicted victory for the PAP's 'strong candidate' for Delta, Madam Chan Choy Siong, in the 1959 Legislative Assembly elections.²⁶² They were proven right: Delta's 15,000 voters gave Chan nearly 70% of the vote in a four-way contest, trumping businessmen from the conservative Liberal Socialist Party and Malayan Chinese Association.²⁶³ Chan, popularly known among low-income Chinese as the '*chee cheong fun* lady' (her mother sold *chee cheong fun* in the town area), was a member of the PAP Central Executive Committee. She was bilingual, having graduated from the Chinese-medium Nanyang Girls' High School. She had been Chairman of the PAP's Women Section, where she had actively campaigned for women's rights since 1956.²⁶⁴ As the previous City Councillor of Kreta Ayer ward, she had helped install standpipes and build bus shelters, dispensaries, and creches under Ong Eng Guan's 'new kampong policy'.²⁶⁵ The 1959 elections were not only a victory for the most progressive candidate but democratic politics as a whole; with voting made compulsory, the turnout was 91%. As Lee Soo Seong explained, 'elections were how people obtained their political education'.²⁶⁶ Elections did not merely reflect prevailing political sentiment but also shaped it, for 'some people

²⁶¹ Singapore, *Report of the Electoral Boundaries Delimitation Committee* (Singapore: Singapore. Electoral Boundaries Delimitation Committee, 1954), p. 14. Election results are from Singapore Elections, <http://www.singapore-elections.com>, accessed 12 Nov 2007.

²⁶² RG 59 746F.00/5-159, Despatch from US Consul General to Department of State titled 'Singapore General Elections', 1 May 1959.

²⁶³ *Who's Who in the Singapore Legislative Assembly Elections, 1959* (Singapore: Tan Hock Lim, 1959), pp. 11-12.

²⁶⁴ Melanie Chew, interview with Ong Pang Boon, in *Leaders of Singapore* (Singapore: Resource Press, 1996), p. 177. Chan was actively involved in the drafting of the Women's Charter, which was passed in 1961.

²⁶⁵ *Petir*, Dec 1957, p. 5; and May 1959, p. 4.

²⁶⁶ Author's interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

might not care for politics but when you had to vote, you had to know politics'.²⁶⁷ The 1959 elections were clearly 'a roar' from people living at the physical and social margins of society.

Chinese-educated students living in Bukit Ho Swee, like their parents, were frequently swept up in the anti-colonial wave. As early as 1950, communist literature was found at Chung Cheng High School (Branch) at Kim Yam Road.²⁶⁸ In April and May 1955, as the Hock Lee Bus strike at Alexandra Road intensified, Lee Soo Seong and his classmates from Chung Cheng Branch went atop the SIT flats opposite the bus depot to watch fellow Chinese students support the strike, performing political songs, speeches and skits;²⁶⁹ as did Tay Ah Chuan, a student at Chuen Min Public School, and his classmates.²⁷⁰ As tensions at the depot mounted in May, the police cordoned off access to both ends of the Bukit Ho Swee stretch of Havelock Road – at Delta Circus and the Havelock Road police station. When fighting erupted between the police and the strikers and students on 12 May, Tay Ah Chuan saw a Hock Lee bus pursued and stoned at Havelock Road.²⁷¹ At Delta Circus, an American journalist was mistaken for a policeman and beaten to death by a crowd,²⁷² while a Chinese student, a resident at 799-D Havelock Road (Or Kio Tau), was shot in the lung and 'paraded' by fellow students from Alexandra to the town area as evidence of police brutality. He died of his wound.²⁷³ Many demonstrating students fled into Bukit Ho Swee, where the police decided not to follow.²⁷⁴ In the 1956 crackdown, when the Lim Yew Hock government banned the Singapore Chinese Middle Schools Students' Union, students at Chung Cheng Branch held a meeting to condemn the action. They called for a cessation of study, despite the principal's objections, for three periods in protest.²⁷⁵ The ensuing riots

²⁶⁷ Author's interviews with Han Tan Juan, 3 Feb 2007; and Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

²⁶⁸ CO 1030/360, Assessment of Communist Penetration of Chinese Middle Schools with Reference to the Campaign against National Service, 8 Oct 1954.

²⁶⁹ Author's interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

²⁷⁰ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

²⁷¹ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

²⁷² CO 1030/336, Despatch from Governor J. Nicoll to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 21 May 1955. According to a resident of Bukit Ho Swee, someone in the kampong was arrested for the murder but in fact had merely taken the journalist's camera and was later released. Author's interview with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007.

²⁷³ CO 1030/235, Text of a Speech by the Chief Secretary William Goode at the Meeting of the Singapore Legislative Assembly on 16 May, 1955.

²⁷⁴ *SM*, 6 Nov 1983.

²⁷⁵ *ST*, 25 Sep 1956.

reached Tiong Bahru Estate, where crowds smashed windows of SIT flats and stoned a military vehicle along Tiong Bahru Road, while Havelock Road police station was also stoned.²⁷⁶

The politicisation of Bukit Ho Swee's youth owed largely to the old boys' associations which cultivated their radical political thinking in the 1950s,²⁷⁷ particularly among those who had only a primary education. Both primary schools in Bukit Ho Swee had old boys' associations, where former students, including the minority who progressed to Middle schools, continued to maintain contact at the associations' premises, where they studied together, ate their meals and slept over. On the surface, they organised social events like concerts, picnics and other cultural, literary and recreational activities but the social engagement formed the basis of political mobilisation for the anti-colonial struggle. As Lee Soo Seong, a student of Kai Kok and Chuen Min primary schools, explained, 'the aim was to organise the students and incite them into action' and sometimes the associations produced and distributed magazines containing leftwing articles.²⁷⁸ In late 1956, the Chinese Industrial and Commercial School Old Boys' Association organised numerous concerts, which allegedly helped spread communist influence.²⁷⁹ A member of the Chuen Min Old Boys' Association had also helped to establish the PAP Branch in Bukit Ho Swee.²⁸⁰ According to Lim You Meng, a student of Kai Kok, some of the schoolteachers were also left-leaning and campaigned for the PAP in the 1959 elections.²⁸¹ In 1960, when the old boys' association of Chong Teck School at Silat Road organised a concert, 1,000 people listened to an association official charge that, although the PAP had been elected into power, 'the Internal Security Council is still dominated by Colonialists'.²⁸² In the same year, Kai Kok's and the Chinese

²⁷⁶ CO 1030/578, Report on the Riots in Singapore, October 1956, Appendix C, 'List of Incidents'.

²⁷⁷ See for instance CO 1030/241, Monthly Intelligence Report, 21 Jun-3 Aug 1956; and CO 1030/241, Monthly Intelligence Report, 13 Oct-30 Nov 1956.

²⁷⁸ Author's interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

²⁷⁹ CO 1030/241, Monthly Intelligence Reports, 4 Aug-7 Sep 1956 & 27 Jul-9 Aug 1956; CO 1030/240, Report of the Singapore Local Intelligence Committee, 9-29 November 1956.

²⁸⁰ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

²⁸¹ Author's interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

²⁸² FO 1091/107 Singapore Special Branch Intelligence Summary, Dec 1960.

Industrial and Commercial School's old boys' association made submissions to the government on the Societies' Bill.²⁸³

The final element in the overt political mobilisation of Bukit Ho Swee, and collaborating with the PAP and the old boys' associations, were the militant rural associations. The Singapore Rural Residents' Association maintained a branch office along Havelock Road.²⁸⁴ In 1960, a Chung Cheng High student who allegedly organised communist-controlled cells in the school was also active in the Tiong Bahru branch of the SRRA.²⁸⁵ In the same year, the SRRA negotiated, on behalf of kampong dwellers at Bukit Merah, with the HDB over the clearance of the kampong for the development of an industrial estate.²⁸⁶ Between 1959 and 1961, the SRRA, in conjunction with the Kai Kok Old Boys' Association and the Singapore Itinerant Hawkers and Stallholders' Association, whose members were mainly kampong dwellers,²⁸⁷ organised festive celebrations, plays and variety shows at night at the Chuen Min School premises.²⁸⁸

The politics of rehousing had also, by the late 1950s, reached the Bukit Ho Swee locality. In the Covent Garden improvement scheme, 'a great majority' of the families sought housing at rents between \$30 and \$40 per month.²⁸⁹ In 1956, the wooden house owners, working with 'political representatives', established a committee to organise the tenants against accepting SIT flats at Queenstown until a satisfactory rate of compensation had been agreed with the Trust.²⁹⁰ This social solidarity underlined the leveling impact of eviction: it affected house owners, shopkeepers as well as poor tenants, and the resistance which emerged cut across class differences and constituted what James Scott termed 'the weapons of the

²⁸³ Singapore Legislative Assembly, *Official Report of the Select Committee on the Societies (Amendment) Bill*, pp. B12-14.

²⁸⁴ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

²⁸⁵ FO 1091/107, Singapore Special Branch Intelligence Summary, Sep 1960.

²⁸⁶ HB 830/57, Notes of a Discussion between Officers of the HDB, Representatives of the SRRA and Certain Settlers from the Redhill Clearance Site, 31 Oct 1960.

²⁸⁷ Singapore Legislative Assembly, *Official Report of the Select Committee on the Societies (Amendment) Bill*, p. C-37.

²⁸⁸ ME 943/57, Applications for Permission to Use School Buildings, 18 Sep 1959, 27 Sep 1960 & 23 Jun 1961.

²⁸⁹ SIT 125/14/47, Memo from Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, to Estates & Lands Manager, SIT, 14 Mar 1956.

²⁹⁰ HB 125/14/47, Notes of a Meeting to Discuss Proposed Action in Connection with Covent Garden Improvement Scheme, 9 Dec 1957; HB 125/16/47, Memo from Estates Officer, SIT, to Estates & Lands Manager, SIT, 11 Jun 1956.

weak'.²⁹¹ The SIT worried over rumours that the dwellers were 'contemplating to engage thugs to give Trust inspectors and *jagas* [Indian watchmen stationed in the area] a thrashing, in view of the rehousing activities and patrolling of the area'.²⁹² Wooden houses which had been sealed off were abruptly reopened by the owners to new tenants. In June, when the SIT's Estates Officer tried to seal off a dwelling, he was stopped by a house owner who had been organising the tenants. The confrontation quickly turned political, as the officer was firmly told that 'I was a European and had no right to issue directions affecting Asians'.²⁹³ The following month, a female house owner struck a watchman, who was helping to clear a family from her dwelling, with a broom, 'presumably dirtied with excreta'.²⁹⁴ On another occasion, a Lands Inspector, with two policemen, was confronted by a man, apparently instigated by two local women, who 'started to use abusive language' and then 'threatened to assault us and later challenged us to a fight....He put it in such a way that we were not to step there again'.²⁹⁵ In October, the Trust considered opening a discursive front in the campaign, to win over public opinion by releasing a press statement underlining that the delay in the scheme was due to 'the intractability of certain people on the site'.²⁹⁶

In July 1958, however, the SIT conceded that it 'had no effective control of the area' and was forced to release the flats reserved for the residents to ordinary housing applicants.²⁹⁷ By mid-1959, the redevelopment of the area was no longer regarded as possible.²⁹⁸ In May, the Trust agreed to revive former tenancies and to attempt to maintain some control over the housing until the scheme could resume.²⁹⁹ In February 1960, the newly-formed HDB found the seals placed on four dwellings broken and the houses either occupied by tenants, both former and new, or used as opium and gambling dens, while vacant land in the area was also used for boat building, wooden box making and storage of timber and other buildings materials.

²⁹¹ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

²⁹² HB 125/16/47, Memo from Rehousing Officer, SIT, to Senior Rehousing Assistant, SIT, 23 Aug 1957.

²⁹³ HB 125/16/47, Memo from Estates Officer, SIT, to Estates & Lands Manager, SIT, 12 Jun 1956.

²⁹⁴ HB 125/16/47, Memo from Rehousing Assistant, SIT, to Estates Officer, SIT, 11 Jul 1956.

²⁹⁵ HB 125/16/47, Memo from Acting Estates Officer, SIT, to Estates Officer, SIT, 4 Jun 1957.

²⁹⁶ HB 1139/56, Notes of Meeting on the Covent Garden Improvement Scheme, 10 Oct 1957.

²⁹⁷ HB 1139/56, Memo from Estates Manager, SIT, to Acting Manager, SIT, 16 Jul 1958.

²⁹⁸ HB 1139/56, Memo from Lands Manager, SIT, to Chief Architect, SIT, 24 Jul 1959.

²⁹⁹ HB 125/54/47, Memo from Chairman, SIT, to PS, MLGLH, 21 May 1959.

‘This is an extremely difficult area’, the Board warned, ‘and the personal safety of the inspectorate would be prejudiced in the event of departmental intervention’.³⁰⁰

The spread of the ‘Black Belt’ was but one side of the postwar housing history of Singapore. The British colonial regime, through the clearance efforts of its municipal and housing agencies, coordinated under the Master Plan, was attempting to bring Chinese families within its control. At the end of the 1950s, public housing was expanding at the margins of the City, in many cases supplanting wooden house dwellers and driving them into other urban kampongs. By the late 1950s, the Singapore Improvement Trust had become the single largest developer of land,³⁰¹ with a tenth of the population living in its houses.³⁰² In the period 1955-1960, the total amount the government had spent on public housing was \$94.3 million, the largest item of expenditure in the social services and third largest overall after transport and public utilities.³⁰³ But the official demolition and clearance policies evoked strong resistance from the wooden house dwellers, which gave form to an increasingly-organised political contest led by the PAP-affiliated rural associations at the urban fringe that had reached Bukit Ho Swee by 1960. As a new plank in its endeavours, the Singapore Improvement Trust also began to build ‘emergency housing’ in the locality at this time.

³⁰⁰ HB 125/54/47, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, to Assistant Secretary, HDB, 25 Feb 1960.

³⁰¹ SIT, *Annual Report 1958*, p. 45.

³⁰² ST, 24 Jul 1958.

³⁰³ Ministry of Finance, *State of Singapore Development Plan, 1961-1964* (Singapore: 1961), p. 25.

Chapter 4

With Wood and Attap Came Fire

Just as urban kampong dwellers faced clearance by the state and private developers in the 1950s, fire was also a hazard of similar magnitude. The Kampong Bukit Ho Swee fire of 1961, albeit the greatest and most important inferno in Singapore's history, was not the sole calamity to strike inflammable areas of unauthorised wooden housing in the 1950s. From the end of World War Two, the expansion of such housing in the City was accompanied by a series of massive blazes, each bearing the moniker of 'one of the greatest fires in Singapore's history', only to be equaled or eclipsed by a subsequent inferno. History records the conflagrations of Kampong Bugis (1951), Geylang Lorong 3 (1953), Aljunied Road (1953), Kampong Tiong Bahru (1955 and 1959), Kampong Koo Chye (1958), and finally, Kampong Bukit Ho Swee (1961).

By mapping the great fires of postwar Singapore in the 1950s, this chapter underlines the close relationship between society, government and environment. While fires straddle the grey area between natural cause and human responsibility, they ought to be understood as a 'trigger' to deeply-rooted demographic, social, economic, political, and consequently historical pressures.¹ In particular, fires reveal cities to be 'sites of disasters' and are themselves 'chronic events rooted in everyday hazard'.² Urban kampong dwellers in Singapore had to negotiate the increased fire hazard resulting from the built-up physical environment on the one hand, and the failure of the colonial government to genuinely deal with the hazardous problem on the other. The great postwar fires were symptomatic of the difficult relationship which existed between the state and urban kampong dwellers over the contested issue of suitable housing.

¹ Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon, Ian Davis & Ben Wisner, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability, and Disasters* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 22-66.

² Mark Pelling, *The Vulnerability of Cities: Natural Disasters and Social Resilience* (London: Earthscan Publications, 2003), pp. 16, 19.

The Kindling Kampongs

Urban kampongs suffered severely from the outbreak of periodic fires after World War Two. As Table 4.1 shows, the total number of fires in Singapore swelled from 187 in 1930 to 442 in 1946 and a record high of 2,917 in 1963. A large proportion of the fires naturally occurred within the City,³ where the bulk of the population lived. However, in the rural areas, where the postwar population was growing at a faster rate, the number of fires also increased substantially.⁴ Fire damage rose from \$0.4 million in 1930 to \$0.9 million in 1946 and \$4.4 million in 1964. The great fires occurred principally in two zones of unauthorised wooden housing flanking the Central Area: southwest of the Singapore River and north and east of the Rochor and Kallang rivers. In 1951, the Singapore Fire Brigade reported:

Many of the fires which the Department attended during the year involved uncontrolled buildings, constructed from combustible materials, erected during the Japanese occupation. Frequently the fires spread from one building to another with alarming rapidity until...the fire assumes conflagration proportions. Not only are these buildings a menace to authorised structures but their destruction renders sometimes hundreds of persons homeless, means of livelihood are destroyed and property which the owners can usually ill afford to lose are consumed. The large areas of plank and attap unauthorised buildings in both the City and Rural Board areas are causing the Department much anxiety, for an outbreak in such an area calls for a large attendance by personnel and appliances, leaving stations denuded.⁵

³ In September 1951, Singapore was awarded the status of a City and the Municipal Commission was renamed the City Council.

⁴ 475 of the 825 (58%) fires in 1949, 291 of 753 (29%) fires in 1950 and 526 of 854 (62%) fires in 1951 occurred within Municipal limits.

⁵ FD, *Annual Report 1951*, p. 1.

Table 4.1: Number of Fires, Fire Risk & Fire Damage in Singapore, 1930-1965

Year	Total No. of Fires	Fire Risk (\$m)	Fire Damage (\$m)	% of Loss
1930	187	18.5	0.4	2.3
1931	142	10.8	0.2	1.7
1932	182	8.4	0.4	4.8
1933	210	6.6	0.2	3.3
1934	216	4.4	0.08	1.8
1935	285	5.3	0.03	0.6
1936	194	0.8	0.01	1.4
1937	222	1.2	0.1	9.2
1938	263	1.0	0.03	2.8
1939	241	3.1	0.2	5.4
1940	343	2.9	0.1	3.8
1941	281	1.3	0.6	4.9
1946	442	12.0	0.9	7.7
1947	524	43.5	0.7	1.7
1948	583	16.7	0.5	2.9
1949	825	12.7	0.2	2.5
1950	753	34.7	1.4	3.9
1951	854	89.6	3.2	3.6
1952	886	59.8	1.1	1.8
1953	998	58.4	3.6	6.3
1954	912	31.0	0.7	2.2
1955	1,348	43.4	3.3	7.6
1956	1,442	36.7	0.8	2.3
1957	1,632	18.1	0.7	4.5
1958	1,735	36.1	1.2	3.2
1959	1,692	34.9	1.4	4.0
1960	1,455	81.4	0.7	8.1
1961	2,313	73.8	4.3	5.8
1962	1,796	34.3	0.8	2.3
1963	2,917	38.3	1.1	2.9
1964	1,459	87.6	4.4	5.0
1965	1,788	91.4	2.3	2.5

Source: FD, *Annual Report*, 1930-1962; SFB, *Annual Report*, 1963-1965.

In 1954, as shown in Table 4.2, the Fire Superintendent identified 42 urban kampongs as serious fire risks, spread out mainly along Havelock, Tiong Bahru and Kampong Bahru roads southwest of the Singapore River; Kallang, Geylang and Changi roads east of the Kallang Basin; Upper Serangoon and MacPherson roads in the northeast of the City; and Balestier and Dunearn roads in the north.⁶ Of these fire-prone kampongs, 18 were located near the Singapore River and 9 in the Kallang Basin. On the recommendation of the 1955 Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party, seven of the kampongs were designated ‘tolerated attap areas’: Bukit

⁶ SIT 808/50, Memo from Superintendent, SFB, to Manager, SIT, 27 Oct 1954.

Theresa, Radin Mas and Heap Guan San southwest of the Singapore River, ranked 26th, 29th and 34th on the fire hazard list respectively; Geylang Serai and Wak Tanjong east of the Kallang Basin, ranked 8th and 9th respectively; and Woodleigh, ranked 38th, and Chantek, ranked 12th, in the northeast and north of the City. As noted in the previous chapter, the ‘tolerated areas’ were supposed to have spine roads and adequate fire breaks but in 1959, the city authorities admitted failure in implementing these public works and preventing further in-filling of wooden houses. Of the eleven kampongs slated for clearance by the Land Clearance and Resettlement Working Party, seven had been highlighted on the Fire Superintendent’s list, including kampongs southwest of the Singapore River, such as Silat, ranked 4th, Bukit Ho Swee and Beo Lane, ranked 5th and 6th, Henderson, ranked 11th, Tiong Bahru, ranked 15th, and at the Kallang Basin, namely, Kampong Bugis, ranked 13th, and Soopoo, ranked 14th.

Part of the increased kampong fire hazard could be attributed to the physical environment and construed as a ‘natural’ cause. The hot and dry seasonal tropical weather typical of Singapore made attap and plank highly-combustible materials, when winds could quickly fan a small fire into a raging blaze. On the other hand, heavy rains in 1954, which flooded numerous parts of Singapore, helped to prevent outbreaks of serious kampong fires that year.⁷ Conversely, in 1957 and 1960, the hot, dry weather increased the number of grass fires.⁸

Less apparent but more crucial was the social and political geography of fire in postwar Singapore. The Singapore Fire Brigade, established in 1888, was the main public agency responsible for dealing with the fire hazard.⁹ Unquestionably, in the postwar era, it suffered from financial and technological constraints. In 1950, it had only 11 officers and 154 fire-fighters for a million people.¹⁰ By 1957, its

⁷ FD, *Annual Report 1954*, p. 2.

⁸ FD, *Annual Report 1957*, p. 3; *Annual Report 1960*, p. 8.

⁹ The Singapore Fire Brigade was assisted in its fire-fighting role by the Auxiliary Fire Service, which came into existence in 1952 as an arm of the Singapore Civil Defence Corps, and the fire brigades of the British army, air and naval forces in Singapore until their withdrawal in 1971.

¹⁰ According to the 1947 census, Singapore’s population was 941,000. M. V. Del Tufo, *A Report on the 1947 Census of Population* (London: Crown Agents for the Colonies, 1949), p. 39.

Table 4.2: List of Kampongs in the City Area in Order of Fire Risk, 1954

Kampong	Main Roads	‘Tolerated attap areas’	Clearance areas
1. Lorong 17	Geylang Road		
2. Lorong 27A	Geylang Road		
3. Lorong 3	Geylang Road		
4. Silat	Kampong Bahru Road		X
5. Beo Lane	Havelock Road-Tiong Bahru Road		X
6. Bukit Ho Swee	Havelock Road-Tiong Bahru Road		X
7. Potong Pasir	Upper Serangoon Road		
8. Geylang Serai	Changi Road	X	
9. Wak Tanjong	Changi Road	X	
10. Engku Aman	Geylang Road		
11. Henderson	Tiong Bahru Road		X
12. Chantek Bahru	Dunearn Road	X	
13. Bugis	Kallang Road		X
14. Soopoo	Kallang Road		X
15. Tiong Bahru	Tiong Bahru Road		X
16. Bintang	Havelock Road		
17. Pukat	Havelock Road		
18. Chia Heng	Moulmein Road		
19. Amber	Mountbatten Road		
20. Boon Teck Road	Balestier Road		
21. Ah Hood Road	Balestier Road		
22. Jalan Ampas	Balestier Road		
23. Lorong 21A	Geylang Road		
24. Martin	Havelock Road		
25. Ampat	MacPherson Road		
26. Bukit Theresa	Kampong Bahru Road	X	
27. Kasita	Kampong Bahru Road		
28. Purmei	Kampong Bahru Road		
29. Radin Mas	Kampong Bahru Road	X	
30. Pahang	Kampong Bahru Road		
31. Covent Garden	Havelock Road		
32. Lew Lian	Upper Serangoon Road		
33. Pasiran	Dunearn Road		
34. Heap Guan San	Telok Blangah Road	X	
35. Ban Siew San	Telok Blangah Road		
36. Jagoh	Telok Blangah Road		
37. Lorong K	East Coast Road-Changi Road		
38. Woodleigh	Upper Serangoon Road	X	
39. Wayang Satu	Dunearn Road		
40. Pisang	Kampong Bahru Road		
41. Marican	Serangoon Road		
42. Teo Chew	Grange Road-River Valley Road		

Source: SIT 808/50, ‘List of Kampongs in City Area in Order of Fire Risk’, in Memorandum from Superintendent, SFB, to Manager, SIT, 27 October 1954.

strength had increased to 25 officers, 37 subordinate officers and 370 other ranks, but Singapore's population had by then swelled to 1.45 million.¹¹ The Brigade's rapid deployment and response times to fire calls was a major difficulty. Before 1949, when it first began to install radio equipment on its fire engines, the Brigade had to rely solely on police transmissions to communicate with its mobile units. Only in 1953 did it stop sharing the police radio frequency and began transmitting on its own network. However, the improvements brought about by the new technology could not fully overcome the constraints imposed by geography. Due to the historical concentration of urban development in the southern apex of the island, traffic congestion on the City's trunk roads worsened after the war. While received wisdom regarded five minutes as the maximum time in a city for a fire truck to reach an address in a high risk area,¹² it took twelve minutes in 1950 for a fire engine from the Sims Avenue station to reach Hill Street and twenty minutes three years later.¹³

To overcome such logistical and spatial limitations, the Brigade began to build new fire stations. Its Central Fire Station at Hill Street and the Geylang station at Sims Avenue had historically served the City and the eastern part of Singapore respectively. In February 1954, the five-bay Alexandra station opened after considerable delay in a kampong area.¹⁴ Its main purpose, however, was to service Queenstown New Town.¹⁵ Another fire station was envisaged at Thomson to serve the planned Toa Payoh public housing scheme in the north but it did not materialise as the housing project itself was long-delayed. A smaller station, however, did open at Bukit Timah in 1956 to serve the factories and housing estates in the northern urban area.¹⁶ The fire stations were intended primarily to protect permanent housing or factories and not areas of private wooden dwellings. Similarly, while the number

¹¹ S. C. Chua, *Report on the Census of Population 1957* (Singapore: Printed by Government Printer, 1964), p. 43.

¹² FD, *Annual Report 1955*, p. 1.

¹³ FD, *Annual Report 1953*, p. 1. Under the law in those days, fire engines had to stop at traffic lights.

¹⁴ OHC, interview with Arthur Lim Beng Lock, 7 Jan 1994.

¹⁵ FD, *Annual Report 1954*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁶ The fifth station was the Serangoon station, formerly the Auxiliary Fire Service Depot (established in 1954). It was commissioned as a fully-operational fire station in 1962 and served the Serangoon district after the Auxiliary Fire Service was disbanded at the end of 1961. A sixth was the Sembawang station, which took over from the British Admiralty Fire Station in 1971. The Sembawang station served the northern areas of Singapore, such as Sembawang, Nee Soon, Mandai, and part of Yio Chu Kang. A station had been planned in the area in the early 1950s for Nee Soon village but never materialised. The Jurong Fire Station came into being in 1975, serving the Jurong Industrial Estate in the west of Singapore.

of fire hydrants in Singapore increased from 3,505 in 1949 to 5,370 in 1960, the water supply to the urban kampongs was often inadequate due to either inaccessible or hilly ground or the failure to install water mains in the area.¹⁷ Direct fire telephone lines likewise connected the Fire Control Room only to strategic public and commercial places.¹⁸ In the 1950s, the Fire Brigade consequently conducted an increasing number of safety inspections and ‘goodwill visits’ to urban and rural areas; its public lectures on fire protection and rudimentary fire-fighting skills were reported to have helped reduce the losses from fire in 1952.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the Brigade’s rescue emphasis was on schools and other public buildings, entertainment places such as cinemas, factories and oil installations, and godowns.

This is not to say that the Brigade ignored the developing fire hazard in the urban kampongs. In 1950, to its fleet of five Dennis Rolls Royce fire engines with 500 gallons per minute (gpm) turbine pumps and two Dennis engines with 900 gpm pumps were added two new Dennis engines ‘of the very latest design’, equipped with improved 1,000 gpm pumps.²⁰ In 1953, the Brigade took its most significant step to tackle the kampong fire hazard by commissioning a specially-designed engine called a water tender, equipped with a portable pump capable of drawing water from wells and ponds far off the main roads; two more water tenders were acquired the following year.²¹ Then in 1956, two lightweight Austin ‘Champ’ water tenders, which had rendered valuable service in villages in Southeast Asia and Hong Kong, were added to the fleet, vehicles which could negotiate narrow kampong lanes and reach fire outbreaks quickly before they grew beyond control.²² These mosquito-like vehicles could also function as ‘water carriers’ to fetch water from more distant areas and rapidly return to the fire site.²³ More water tenders were acquired subsequently and proved of ‘great value’ in fire-fighting operations in congested kampongs.²⁴ By 1960, the Brigade possessed four Dennis pump escapes

¹⁷ FD, *Annual Report 1950*, p. 15.

¹⁸ Namely, cinemas and theatres within the City and to other public departments, including the military fire services and police force, the Civil Airport at Kallang and the Singapore Glass Manufacturers at Henderson Road.

¹⁹ FD, *Annual Report 1952*, p. 12.

²⁰ FD, *Annual Report 1950*, p. 11.

²¹ FD, *Annual Report 1953*, p. 2.

²² FD, *Annual Report 1956*, p. 1.

²³ SS, 18 Jul 1953.

²⁴ FD, *Annual Report 1957*, p. 2.

with 1,000 gpm pumps, five engines with 1,000 gpm pumps, two engines with 700/900 gpm pumps, six 'regular' water tenders with 1,000 gpm pumps, and six lightweight tenders.

The kampong fire hazard also had a critical social dimension linked directly to the Fire Brigade. The Brigade historically had a strained relationship with the lower-income, Chinese-speaking population. In the colonial era, fire-fighters were usually Malays led by Caucasian officers. The latter, according to fire officer Arthur Lim Beng Lock, who became Fire Chief in 1972, were 'discards' from the fire service in Britain and lacked experience in leadership roles and working with the Chinese.²⁵ More crucially, the service had acquired a reputation among the Chinese for fire site pilfering and criminal acts. Arthur Lim revealed that before the war, Chinese residents in the Central Area called a passing fire engine *pah chiu chia* ('robbery vehicles'); fire-fighters were encouraged by their officers to pocket valuables found at a fire site. In the PAP era, when theft was expressly prohibited, fire engines were closely associated with kampong clearance operations, where a passing pump was commonly viewed as being 'on another URA [Urban Renewal Authority] job'.²⁶ Fire-fighters were also commonly secret society members. According to Lim, fire-fighter gangsters controlled gambling dens and used street alarms to call for assistance in gang clashes!²⁷ As Neivelle Tan, a former secret society member, noted, 'the fire brigade was very feared and very well known for their raids, because they had very natural weapons – their belts with their big heavy buckle head', 'a weapon that they could carry legally, on or off duty'. Most fire-fighters, according to Tan, belonged to the '08' secret society, which was influential in the Malay-populated Geylang and Kembangan areas.²⁸ One of its splinters was the Double Axe Gang, organised by a City Council fire-fighter in 1954.²⁹

The social-communal tensions severely hampered the Fire Brigade's work. When a two-storey wooden shophouse at the junction of Kim Seng Road and River

²⁵ OHC, interview with Arthur Lim Beng Lock, 7 Jan 1994.

²⁶ OHC, interview with Arthur Lim Beng Lock, 7 Jan 1994. The Urban Renewal Authority, established as part of the HDB by the PAP government in 1967, was responsible for the clearance and redevelopment of the Central Area. It became a separate agency in 1974.

²⁷ OHC, interview with Arthur Lim Beng Lock, 7 Jan 1994.

²⁸ OHC, interview with Neivelle Tan, 7 Feb 1995.

²⁹ CID, *Booklet on Chinese Secret Societies in Singapore*, 1958, p. 80.

Valley Road was set alight by burning joss in 1949, the Brigade claimed that the Chinese dwellers did not call for help but rather concentrated on saving their belongings.³⁰ It was also natural that kampong dwellers instinctively tried to fight the fire themselves; Arthur Lim declared that ‘they were quite a nuisance because they tended to want to pull our hoses and try to get water to protect their own properties’ and ‘we had to get the police in to drive them away’.³¹ Street alarm boxes, connected to the fire stations by cable and placed in high risk areas in the City, became an important feature of the public landscape and alarm system, particularly since telephones were not commonly installed in kampongs in the 1950s. It is both ironic and telling that, despite these new safety precautions, the Fire Brigade still received late calls in many instances of major kampong fires.

An analysis of the causes of fires, shown in Table 4.3, provides a clear indication of the main reasons for the postwar kampong fires. The data is not conclusive because of the large proportion of fires, particularly between 1949 and 1958, whose causes were not ascertained. Unfortunately, there is also no specific breakdown of the causes of kampong fires. What emerges strikingly from the data, however, is the sheer *ordinariness* of the main causes of fires in the rhythm of everyday kampong life.³² ‘Light thrown down’, ‘rubbish fires’ and the ‘sun’s rays striking broken glass’ could be attributed to the discarding of or failure to remove used or unwanted items in the kampong; ‘joss burning’ to religious worship and celebrations within the home or nearby; ‘sparks from fires and stoves’ to household chores and the use of firewood for cooking; and ‘fireworks’ and ‘children playing with matches’, to celebrations and recreation in the kampong’s open spaces. Two of the six great kampong fires in the 1950s discussed below occurred during Chinese festive celebrations in which much burning of joss took place. In Kampong Henderson, Joyce Horsley explained, the accumulated debris and refuse lying about contributed to the fire hazard.³³ When such everyday activities contribute

³⁰ SFB, *Annual Report 1949*, pp. 3–4.

³¹ OHC, interview with Arthur Lim Beng Lock, 7 Jan 1994.

³² The main exception is ‘electrical short circuits’, since few kampong dwellers had access to electricity.

³³ Author’s interview with Joyce Horsley, 3 Nov 2007.

Table 4.3: Main Causes of Fires in Singapore, 1949-1970

Year	Total	Light thrown down	Electrical Short Circuits	Rubbish Fires	Joss Burning	Sun's Rays Striking Broken Glass	Sparks from Fires & Stoves	Fireworks, including Joss Crackers	Children Playing with Matches	Naked Light	Arson & Incendiarism	Unknown Causes
1949	825	113	41	93	61	36	11	4	3	--	1	325
1950	753	52	48	61	47	19	17	3	9	--	70	273
1951	854	131	57	57	54	143	25	3	18	--	24	165
1952	886	125	69	87	153	65	17	--	18	--	3	146
1953	998	174	74	33	71	49	23	16	23	--	6	299
1954	912	128	118	56	66	68	16	12	20	26	2	182
1955	1,348	243	151	124	87	128	16	25	26	41	16	237
1956	1,442	400	122	142	81	115	28	37	15	48	51	108
1957	1,632	498	145	162	57	139	13	21	9	40	8	221
1958	1,735	380	164	131	51	198	23	15	7	26	13	287
1959	1,692	364	191	102	22	245	24	32	15	36	12	96
1960	1,455	342	179	90	13	133	17	34	20	45	6	21
1961	2,313	650	213	150	39	316	20	19	24	42	11	116
1962	1,796	373	249	115	34	191	32	51	12	47	17	40
1963	2,917	819	223	229	27	434	28	12	10	78	21	82
1964	1,459	323	276	61	16	100	14	11	15	65	58	36
1965	1,788	577	235	152	12	165	30	26	14	80	8	42
1966	1,593	474	256	101	14	96	17	24	4	73	8	56
1967	1,972	580	307	142	10	129	15	83	7	105	9	58
1968	2,581	798	287	254	21	285	30	144	6	120	10	71
1969	1,867	421	328	136	19	133	28	18	11	98	18	97
1970	2,366	607	325	196	13	157	2	39	13	101	31	115

Adapted from FD, *Annual Report*, 1949-1962; SFB, *Annual Report*, 1963-1970.

consistently to the outbreak of fire, the root cause of the problem, then, can no longer simply be blamed on 'carelessness' or 'negligence', but rather on the social-environmental pressures which made these activities hazardous.

A history of 'infernos' is, by necessity, empirically biased. There was a 'silent majority' of fires which were controlled by the Fire Brigade or the kampong dwellers themselves. On many occasions, it is important to note, kampong fires were contained before they grew out of control. For instance, Kampong Potong Pasir on the east bank of Kallang River was spared destructive blazes in 1954 and 1960 when small fires were successfully extinguished. In 1957, prompt action by two water tenders succeeded in containing two burning attap houses in Henderson Road and

prevented the flames from spreading.³⁴ In the same year, a midnight fire in a rubber godown at Kim Yam Road threatened to engulf a nearby kampong but was safely extinguished.³⁵ In January the following year, a fire in Kampong Tiong Bahru was subdued by several water tenders.³⁶ In 1959, a fire in two houses in Geylang Lorong 1 was extinguished before it could reach adjacent wooden dwellings built over the swampy ground.³⁷ In 1960, a large fire, which ravaged a 1-acre area and rendered 25 wooden house dwelling families homeless, threatened Kampong Henderson before it was finally brought under control.³⁸ Two years later, the Fire Brigade, the Army Fire Service and the local fire-fighting squad fended off a large fire in the same kampong.³⁹ And there were certainly many other instances of fire subdued by kampong dwellers themselves which were never reported to the Fire Brigade. Yet all these cases of positive outcomes belied other highly-dangerous situations; after all, serious conflagrations broke out in most of these localities in the 1950s.

Million Dollar Fire: Kampong Bugis, 1951

The first great postwar fire struck Kampong Bugis on 1 August 1951 in a thickly-populated industrial area immediately north of the Rochor River and east of the Central Area. The Fire Brigade, alerted at 9.22 am, had great difficulty fighting the fire, which threatened the City Gas Works across the road and the godowns and shops east of the kampong. A shift in the blaze's direction due to the wind forced the Brigade to summon reinforcements.⁴⁰ The heat generated from the flames lifted the zinc roofs 'like dry leaves' and kept them airborne a hundred feet high for up to half a minute at a time.⁴¹ Leo Ah Sin, a plant controller who worked and lived in Kampong Bugis, remembered how the heat peeled the paint right off the walls of the workers' quarters in the kampong.⁴²

³⁴ FD, *Annual Report 1957*, p. 3.

³⁵ FD, *Annual Report 1957*, p. 5.

³⁶ FD, *Annual Report 1958*, p. 4.

³⁷ FD, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 4.

³⁸ FD, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 3.

³⁹ FD, *Annual Report 1962*, pp. 7-8.

⁴⁰ FD, *Annual Report 1951*, pp. 6-7.

⁴¹ SS, 2 Aug 1951.

⁴² OHC, interview with Leo Ah Sin, 9 Oct 1997.

Part of the severity of the blaze was undoubtedly due to the haphazard nature of unauthorised wooden housing. Kampong Bugis was 'a legacy of the Japanese occupation', where '[h]uts and shops sprang up in indiscriminate profusion and firemen yesterday found the greatest difficulty in running their hoses through the very narrow lanes of the area'.⁴³ The kampong, Leo Ah Sin noted, had an interior road wide enough for pedestrian traffic and motorcycles but not cars.⁴⁴ For more than five hours, the fire engaged ten fire engines and 150 fire-fighters aided by the British, Chinese, Malays, and Eurasians, who helped man hoses and smash down walls and roofs.⁴⁵ The situation, Leo described, was desperate: 'some people used to carry pails, turn by turn....but you cannot do anything, the flame was terrible, very high. Because why, a lot of clothing, because that time, they ordered the textile clothing, all in bundles, all put inside, something like a warehouse'.⁴⁶ However, the scale of destruction must also be attributed to the authorities' failure to provide the necessary protection to the kampong against fire. The fire-fighters found the water supply in the mains inadequate and had to draw water from the Kallang River. As J. G. Shaw, Superintendent of the Brigade, conceded, 'What we were up against was a poor water supply. Lines were laid on but it was found that there was no water'.⁴⁷ There was speculation in the *Singapore Standard*, the English version of the *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, that the assigned water had been diverted from nearby Sin Koh Street to prevent wastage of use.⁴⁸

The fire disaster, which devastated eight acres and 400 wooden houses, shops and workshops, was attributed to a 'mysterious explosion' inside the kampong. Pamphlets circulated by the Malayan Communist Party accused the government of having started the fire to remove 'filthy congested huts filled with Chinese'. The police maintained that it had found no evidence of arson.⁴⁹ Most of the houses in the kampong were uninsured and one landowner lost all his seventy houses.⁵⁰ The number of fire victims, which at an early stage was thought to be 5,000-7,000

⁴³ SIT 1231/53, Minutes of Board meeting, 9 Dec 1953; *ST*, 2 Aug 1951.

⁴⁴ OHC, interview with Leo Ah Sin, 9 Oct 1997.

⁴⁵ *ST*, 2 Aug 1951.

⁴⁶ OHC, interview with Leo Ah Sin, 9 Oct 1997.

⁴⁷ *ST*, 2 Aug 1951.

⁴⁸ *SS*, 2 Aug 1951.

⁴⁹ *ST*, 30 Aug 1951.

⁵⁰ *SS*, 2 Aug 1951.

persons, was about 600 families (3,000 persons).⁵¹ The fire damage was estimated at \$1 million.

Scene of Indescribable Confusion: Geylang Lorong 3, 1953

A kampong named Orang Laut northwest of Kampong Bugis was also the site of a major fire on 16 July 1953, thought to have started from glowing charcoal from a cooking stove. The fire engines, arriving from Geylang Fire Station at 9.53 am, presumably to a late call, found a large area ablaze. The fire spread rapidly due to a gusty wind despite the efforts of six engines drawing water from nearby hydrants and numerous creeks in the area. It was 'a scene of indescribable confusion'. With the flames rising as high as 200 feet beneath what was described as an 'atomic bomb' cloud of smoke, some fire-fighters on several occasions had to retreat to avoid being engulfed by the smoke and flames. Others found themselves holding nozzles from which no water flowed, as the flames had burned through the canvas hosepipes. Hordes of panicked villagers plunged into a muddy creek with their belongings and struggled to safety.⁵² At 10.45 am, the inferno changed direction southwest towards Lorong 17, where a creek further obstructed the Fire Brigade's work. The flames were brought under control at 11.30 am and, according to Brigade officers, hundreds of other wooden houses in the locality had been saved.⁵³ The fire devastated 9.3 acres and destroyed 244 wooden houses, rendering 595 families (2,385 people) homeless in the process.⁵⁴

The *Singapore Standard* found the fire 'strangely reminiscent' of the Kampong Bugis blaze, given the similar environmental conditions – shortage of water, a strong wind and tinder-dry attap roofs.⁵⁵ Again, much of the blame was laid on buildings 'sited haphazardly with ill-defined unmetalled lanes and little or no space between the buildings, ideal conditions for a conflagration', forcing fire-

⁵¹ *ST*, 16 Aug 1951.

⁵² *ST*, 17 Jul 1953.

⁵³ *FD, Annual Report 1953*, p. 5.

⁵⁴ It transpired that '[t]he area which has been burnt out is only a small portion of this whole kampong', and half of the fire site belonged to Lee Rubber Company. SIT 601/53, Memo titled 'Kallang Basin Fire Relief Scheme' by Manager, SIT, 17 Jul 1953; and SS, 18 Jul 1953.

⁵⁵ *SS*, 17 Jul 1953.

fighters to negotiate 'narrow, winding alleyways'.⁵⁶ In the aftermath of the fire, British administrators and Chinese community leaders focussed on the technical issues of how to make the urban kampongs less fire prone. Tan Chin Tuan, Chinese Chambers of Commerce representative in the Legislative Council, called for the creation of fire lanes in congested urban kampongs and for experts to assess the overall kampong fire risk. Governor John Nicoll assured Tan that his proposal would be investigated.⁵⁷ The City Council, meanwhile, encouraged kampong dwellers to replace attap roofing with non-combustible material such as asbestos, zinc or aluminum.⁵⁸ No consideration was given as to whether this was an economically feasible scheme for the kampong population or how the authorities might assist the endeavour. More wooden houses with roofs made of zinc or layered with a fire-resistant rubber sheet locally known as 'black oil cloth' appeared in the 1950s but they remained a distinct minority.

No to Non-combustible Attap Roofing: Aljunied Road, 1953

The Geylang Lorongs were hit by another serious fire on 24 October that year, in a kampong at Lorong 25 at the junction of Aljunied Road and Sims Avenue, inhabited mainly by Chinese and a few Malays, Indians and Eurasians. Once again, the Fire Brigade received a late call from a member of the public operating a street alarm at 2.58 pm. However, the fire was believed to have started from sparks from a baker's oven which ignited a nearby attap roof and had begun at least eight minutes earlier. The kampong faced near total destruction, given the lack of water in the locality, which forced a number of jets to be turned off in order to raise the overall level of the water pressure. Only the work of the water tenders, by drawing water from a small pond on the western flank of the fire, managed to extinguish small pockets of flame and averted an even greater catastrophe. The performance of the two new water tenders from the Royal Air Force in the Lorong 3 and Aljunied Road fires so impressed the Fire Brigade that it subsequently acquired more such pumps.

⁵⁶ *ST*, 17 Jul 1953.

⁵⁷ *SSLCP* 1953, 21 Jul 1953, pp. B220-221, B224.

⁵⁸ *SSLCP* 1953, 15 Sep 1953, pp. B258.

Even then, 229 wooden houses in an area covering 4.5 acres were destroyed, rendering 263 families (over 1,000 people) homeless.⁵⁹

Occurring so soon after the Lorong 3 fire, the disaster elicited maximum censure of the authorities from sections of the public. Much of the blame for the fire was placed on the doorstep of the City Council, which had begun to demolish newly-built unauthorised wooden dwellings in the City. The Singapore Attap Dwellers' Association was actively involved in the relief work in both Geylang fires that year. Its President, Mak Pak Shee, had helped dwellers tear down their attap roofs in a bid to prevent the flames from spreading in the earlier Lorong 3 fire.⁶⁰ Mak accused the Council of neglecting the dwellers' welfare through the ban it imposed on the construction of wooden dwellings in the City and urged Council members to improve water supply, road access and sanitation in the kampongs.⁶¹ He proposed that the Council designate areas of wooden housing as a way to control their spread, a precursor to the 'attap areas' policy which was taken up by urban administrators in 1955. 'Attap dwellers', Mak declared, 'are by no means haphazard in their ideas of the type of homes they build. Humble people though they are, they are just as anxious as the more fortunate citizens to have decent, clean homes and spaced out in such a manner as would keep them safe from fire disasters'.⁶²

The *Straits Times*, meanwhile, urged the Council to implement proposals to establish more outlying fire stations, replace attap roofs with asbestos sheeting, train local auxiliary groups to fight fires, and ensure an adequate water supply in the mains. The newspaper warned that should the City Council discuss the fire hazard long enough, 'fire will solve the problem for them'.⁶³ From the beginning of November, the Fire Brigade carried out fire prevention and fire-fighting talks in kampongs across the island. On 30 October, four fire-fighters visited Bukit Ho Swee and spoke to more than a hundred residents, emphasising the need for 'at least one man to keep his head and summon the brigade'.⁶⁴ Chan Kum Chee, City Councillor for East ward, urged the government to provide non-combustible attap roofing at

⁵⁹ FD, *Annual Report 1953*, p. 7.

⁶⁰ *ST*, 17 Jul 1953.

⁶¹ *SS*, 26 Oct 1953.

⁶² *SS*, 30 Oct 1953.

⁶³ *ST*, 26 Oct 1953.

⁶⁴ *ST*, 31 Oct 1953.

subsidised prices.⁶⁵ The proposal was rejected by T. P. F. McNeice, President of the City Council, who felt that ‘any method we take should be a constructive one. It must not perpetuate the appalling conditions in which attap dwellers are living at present’,⁶⁶ and that re-roofing with government money ‘would only prolong the life of these insanitary huts’. ‘The money would be better spent’, McNeice concluded, ‘in building new houses complying with Municipal requirements’.⁶⁷ Clearly, the prevention of unauthorised wooden houses was more important to the colonial regime than making them safe from fire.

Mooncake Festival Fire: Kampong Tiong Bahru, 1955

The Tiong Bahru fire⁶⁸ of 30 September 1955 was the first major conflagration to strike the unauthorised wooden housing southwest of the Singapore River since the Bukit Ho Swee inferno of 1934. The disaster, which occurred during the Mid-Autumn Festival,⁶⁹ was exacerbated by the fact that the Fire Brigade was not notified until 3.45 pm, twenty minutes after the fire started. When the first fire engine arrived at the scene, the blaze, fanned by a robust wind, had reached ‘serious proportions’.⁷⁰ The nearest telephone was reportedly half a mile away down a winding kampong path.⁷¹ In 1954, the Fire Superintendent had called the locality ‘one of the most dangerous fire risks in the town area’.⁷² Hampering the fire-fighters’ work were the narrow approach lanes and numerous ditches which littered the area.⁷³ However, shortage of water, which was a problem of municipal administration rather than local geography, was again a significant detrimental factor. The fire hydrant nearest to the flames was 250 yards away, while the hoses had to be joined, reducing the power of the jets. The ubiquitous water tenders were again in action, as were more than a hundred volunteers and policemen, who watered down attap roofs and tore down wooden houses to create fire breaks. With the help of the

⁶⁵ *ST*, 27 Oct 1953.

⁶⁶ *ST*, 29 Oct 1953.

⁶⁷ *CC, Minutes of Meetings 1953*, 28 Oct 1953, p. 11.

⁶⁸ Also called the Kampong Silat fire, given the proximity of the two places.

⁶⁹ Also known as the Mooncake Festival for the mooncakes customarily eaten on the occasion.

⁷⁰ *FD, Annual Report 1955*, p. 5.

⁷¹ *ST*, 1 Oct 1955.

⁷² SIT 808/50, Memo from Superintendent, SFB, to Manager, SIT, 13 Aug 1954.

⁷³ *SS*, 1 Oct 1955.

Auxiliary Fire Service and Army Fire Service, the Brigade managed to control the fire after an hour. The disaster destroyed 150 wooden houses and rendered 181 families (792 people) homeless.⁷⁴

Six Dead: Kampong Koo Chye, 1958

This conflagration, apparently caused by burning joss used during the Chinese Qing Ming Festival on 5 April 1958,⁷⁵ occurred near Geylang Lorong 3, the site of the 1953 fire. The Fire Brigade, which received the call at 4.25 pm, managed to save part of the kampong, but five acres of land were burned out. The fire was so ferocious that it had started during a thunderstorm, after which the wind fanned the growing flames towards the wooden houses on the opposite river bank. As in the previous Lorong fires, a combination of geographical and administrative factors were at play that evening which made fire-fighting extremely difficult: the fire-fighters had a hard time moving through the kampong, there were inadequate fire hydrants nearby and the crowd of refugees fleeing the blaze further hindered the work of the Brigade.⁷⁶ Along Lorong 17, fire engines from Central, Serangoon and Geylang fire stations pumped water from the Kallang River and managed to turn back the fire and contain it at about 9 pm. It was a tragic blaze: one adult and five children were reported dead or missing.⁷⁷ Two of the fatalities were a mother and child: apparently 'the mother fell and was trapped by the flames as she tried to escape from the fire clutching her child to her breast'.⁷⁸ Another victim was a four-year-old child, whose grief-stricken mother had to be carried away from the fire by rescue workers.⁷⁹ 329 families (2,050 people) were rendered homeless in a calamity considered 'one of the worst in the annals of the [Fire] Brigade's history'.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ FD, *Annual Report 1955*, p. 5.

⁷⁵ ST, 7 Apr 1958. Also known as All Souls Day, the Qing Ming is an occasion for the Chinese to remember and honour one's ancestors, which involves, among other things, the burning of joss sticks and paper.

⁷⁶ SS, 6 Apr 1958.

⁷⁷ FD, *Annual Report 1958*, pp. 5-6.

⁷⁸ ST, 7 Apr 1958.

⁷⁹ SFP, 8 Apr 1958.

⁸⁰ FD, *Annual Report 1958*, p. 6.

The Voluntary Kampong Fire-Fighting Squads

With proper assistance, low-income wooden house communities can develop effective strategies, resources and social networks to cope with urban hazards.⁸¹ Such efforts, both spontaneous and organised, had evolved in Singapore by the early 1950s. In 1953, for instance, the residents of Geylang Lorong 17, having witnessed the Lorong 3 blaze, formed their own 'fire brigade'.⁸² Following the Aljunied Road fire in the same year, the Fire Brigade began to promote greater awareness of the fire hazard among kampong dwellers. In 1954, the Brigade credited the residents' success in subduing several kampong fires to this campaign.⁸³ In July that year, when fire ravaged a market in Lorong Tai Seng and threatened the large kampong around it, the dwellers quickly doused the roofs of their houses with water.⁸⁴ In 1957, the Fire Brigade began to conduct regular awareness lectures, drills and demonstrations in kampongs.

The most concerted effort to combat the kampong fire hazard occurred in the aftermath of the December 1957 City Council elections. The 1958 Koo Chye fire triggered a fresh initiative by the city administration, now dominated by an anti-colonial political party seeking to mobilise the low-income Chinese population. In May, the Fire Brigade, with the sympathetic support of the City Council, formed volunteer fire-fighting squads in 36 urban kampongs (see Table 4.4), local teams meant to 'deal with outbreaks of fire and hold them in check pending the arrival of the Brigade'.⁸⁵ Each squad of a minimum of twenty men was trained by the Brigade with the help of kampong elders and provided basic equipment, comprising six knapsack pumps, ten buckets, six 2-gallon soda or acid fire extinguishers, and two attap hooks with pole handles to pull off burning attap roofs.⁸⁶ Kampongs with more resources, such as those in Geylang Lorong 29 and Havelock Road, built lookout towers, although it was still difficult to spot a fire in a congested kampong. By the

⁸¹ Pelling, *The Vulnerability of Cities*, pp. 52-65.

⁸² CC, *Minutes of Proceedings* 1953, 31 Aug 1953.

⁸³ FD, *Annual Report* 1954, p. 2.

⁸⁴ FD, *Annual Report* 1954, p. 7.

⁸⁵ FD, *Annual Report* 1958, p. 1.

⁸⁶ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings* 1958, 19-20 May 1958, pp. 420-422. The extinguisher acid, however, was sometimes stolen for use in secret society fights. OHC, interview with Arthur Lim Beng Lock, 7 Jan 1994.

Table 4.4: Fire-Fighting Squads in Urban and Rural Kampongs

Year Formed	Kampong	Squads*
1958	Amber	1
1958	Beo Lane	3
1958	Bukit Ho Swee	4
1958	Heap Chin Geap	1
1958	Heap Guan San	2
1958	Henderson	3
1958	Koo Chye	2
1958	Lorong Tai Seng	5
1958	Pisang Bahru	1
1958	Potong Pasir	7
1958	Silat	3
1958	Soopoo	1
1958	Tiong Bahru	5
1959	Buona Vista	1
1959	Boon Teck	5
1959	Bukit Bintang	2
1959	Ban Siew San	2
1959	Bukit Merah	2
1959	Bugis	2
1959	Kallang Basin	3
1959	Lorong 1	4
1959	Lorong 3	1
1959	Lorong 17	2
1959	King's Theatre	2
1959	Jagoh	1
1959	Bukit Kasita	1
1959	Radin Mas	3
1959	Lorong 23	2
1959	Hock Soon	2
1959	Lorong 27	3
1960	Cheow Keng	1
1961	Lorong 29	1
1962	Delta	5
1963	Bukit Purmei	Unspecified
1963	Lim Teck Boo	Unspecified
1964	Alexandra Terrace	Unspecified
1964	Bedok	Unspecified
1964	Chia Keng	Unspecified
1964	Lorong 5	1

* Number of squads established in that year.

Adapted from: FD, *Annual Report*, 1958-1962; SFB, *Annual Report*, 1963-1964.

year's end, as Table 4.4 shows, there were 38 fire-fighting squads in 13 urban kampongs.⁸⁷ By 1960, there were 82 squads in 30 kampongs, including persons with

⁸⁷ FD, *Annual Report 1958*, p. 10.

fire-fighting experience who had served in the regular or auxiliary fire brigades.⁸⁸ Of the 39 kampongs with fire-fighting squads formed between 1958 and 1964, 29 were areas with high fire risk, including 17 in the locality southwest of the Singapore River and 12 in the Geylang area. A total of seven fire-fighting squads were established in Beo Lane and Bukit Ho Swee in 1958.

In 1961, the fire-fighting squads helped to extinguish more than fifteen kampong fires. Soon Eng Boh, a long-time resident of Geylang Lorongs 12 and 27, and a grassroots leader, who helped form fire-fighting squads in the locality following the Koo Chye disaster, stated that while larger blazes were beyond their control, kampong dwellers could prevent a small fire from growing into an inferno.⁸⁹ In 1960, one of the squads requested to bear its own flag. The authorities, however, agreed on a standard flag for all squads, as, according to an official, it was feared that having a separate flag for each fire-fighting party 'might introduce the idea of 'kampongism' as against unity'.⁹⁰ A standard design, bearing a flame, helmet and axe placed centrally inside a map of Singapore, and bordered by the words 'Kampong Volunteer Fire Fighting Squad' in the four official languages, was produced.

As another clear sign of the party's plan to mobilise urban kampong dwellers from both within official circles and from the political margins of the anti-colonial movement, the PAP, through its leftwing rural and old boys' associations, sponsored fire-fighting squads in the urban kampongs. Bukit Ho Swee's fire-fighting squads, according to Tay Ah Chuan, were recruited from the local branch of the SRRA and Chuen Min and Kai Kok old boys' associations. Tay, who joined one of the fire-fighting squads when he was in Chuen Min Old Boys' Association, explained that 'our association was not equipped to fight a fire. We merely had to be observant'. The regular surveillance at dusk was carried out typically by working adults and students like Tay, for in the day, they had to work or study.⁹¹

⁸⁸ FD, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 10.

⁸⁹ OHC, interview with Soon Eng Boh, 16 Feb 1982.

⁹⁰ MC 1003/59, Memo from Acting Assistant Secretary, MOC, to PS, MHA, 9 Nov 1960.

⁹¹ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

The primary aim of the fire-fighting squads organised by the left, which distinguished such teams from the Fire Brigade-trained squads, was the prevention of arson. Lily Wee, staying in Henderson, noted that 'there were a few arson cases in the kampong, so they formed some volunteer patrols to go round at night'; on one occasion, someone 'actually threw a burning piece of cloth onto the roof but the people were now quite alert so they managed to get it'.⁹² Chio Cheng Thun, the Singapore Rural Residents' Association organiser in Lorong Tai Seng, explained:

When kampong dwellers faced eviction, we organised fire-fighting squads for fear that the landlord would set fire to the houses. We organised them to patrol the village at night. This arson happened in many places like Geylang. We didn't see it or catch the arsonists but if you didn't want to move and if they burned your houses, you naturally had to move out, then they could develop the land. The squads were not organised in all places but in areas where some problem had occurred. If there was fire, they would sound the alarm. It was a self-help measure. The aim was not to fight fire but to prevent people from setting fire, so they didn't have much fire-fighting equipment.⁹³

Bukit Ho Swee's fire-fighting squads were established for the same reason. My father, living along Havelock Road, did night shifts several times a week as a member of a fire-fighting squad; it had been organised because 'the kampong was afraid that people from outside would come and start a fire or a fire would break out here'.⁹⁴ Before the 1961 fire, as Tay Yan Woon explained, 'people said that Bukit Ho Swee was being evicted, and everybody had to guard their houses. There were people keeping watch in shifts in the middle of the night because they were afraid that someone might come along and set fire. If a stranger came in, they would be questioned, and if they did not answer satisfactorily, they would be beaten up'.⁹⁵ Two cases of arson in Bukit Ho Swee, the *Nanyang Siang Pau* reported, had been

⁹² Author's interview with Lily Wee, 3 Jun 2007.

⁹³ Author's interview with Chio Cheng Thun, 7 Mar 2007.

⁹⁴ Author's interview with Loh Tian Ho, 13 Jan 2006.

⁹⁵ Author's interview with Tay Yan Woon, 28 Sep 2006.

prevented by residents in 1960.⁹⁶ As Tay Ah Chuan recalled, ‘on several occasions, fire was prevented. Until the last time, the fire burned through’.⁹⁷

Friday 13: Kampong Tiong Bahru, 1959

The ‘Friday 13 fire tragedy’ of February 1959 surpassed all previous fires in its scale of destruction. It was believed to have started in a paper bag maker’s shop near Beo Lane before crossing Tiong Bahru Road. Eyewitnesses apparently saw four children let off fire rockets, one of which lodged in the bone dry attap eaves of the shop. As they recounted, ‘[t]here was an explosion and the next moment the roof was in flames’, and, ‘[w]ith the strong wind, the fire instantly spread to our house which was quickly gutted’.⁹⁸ The Fire Brigade was notified at 1.07 pm and arrived on the scene four minutes later. Finding the flames fanned by strong winds spreading quickly among the closely-built wooden houses, the Brigade rushed 12 fire engines to the site. The huge fire destroyed 600-700 wooden houses and destroyed property worth an estimated \$2 million.⁹⁹ It killed a blind, crippled lady, aged 76, and left a number of persons still unaccounted for a few days later. It rendered 1,016 families (5,220 people) homeless, comprising some 462 families with more than five persons, 429 families with five or less persons and 125 single persons.¹⁰⁰

This was the first major fire which engaged the services of the kampong fire-fighting volunteers, and ‘a considerable amount of good work was done to help to contain the fire’, including forming bucket chains, manning hoses and helping fire-fighters pull down houses to create fire breaks.¹⁰¹ Tan Tiam Ho, a Bukit Ho Swee resident, was one of the volunteers, helping to lay out the Fire Brigade’s hoses.¹⁰² Less than two months earlier, the same squads had contained a fire in three attap

⁹⁶ NYSP, 26 May 1961.

⁹⁷ Author’s interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

⁹⁸ SS, 14 Feb 1959.

⁹⁹ NYSP, 14 Feb 1959.

¹⁰⁰ SS, 14 Feb 1959.

¹⁰¹ FD, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 4; CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1959*, 3 Mar 1959, pp. 10-11.

¹⁰² Author’s interview with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007.

houses in the kampong.¹⁰³ But they faced a far more difficult situation on this occasion. For instance, Mayor Ong Eng Guan and Fire Superintendent J. Angus criticised kampong dwellers who, trying to retrieve their belongings from their homes, obstructed the work of the fire-fighters and volunteers.¹⁰⁴ More crucial were the twin difficulties of access to fight the fire and the inadequate water supply. A reader of the *Straits Times* subsequently asked the government to use a bulldozer to open a path for the fire engines in the next kampong fire, because in this case the engines had been ‘rendered decorative by lack of sufficient water supplies’.¹⁰⁵ The Brigade utilised eight hydrants and water from two open ditches but in some cases the jets of water produced were still weak.¹⁰⁶ Labour Front City Councillor of River Valley ward, Ho Kok Hoe, who with other Councillors rushed from a Council meeting to the fire site and was helping to hold a fire hose, felt ‘all of a sudden the hose had a spurt of water, just for a moment, and then it went *flop, flop*, and flattened. And then there was no more water coming out’. Ho, also an artist, subsequently captured the desperation of the scene in a painting highlighting the themes of ‘destruction and rising hope’ (see Plate 4.1).¹⁰⁷ According to Mak Pak Shee, ironically, the problem was that the area had too many standpipes which reduced the water pressure.¹⁰⁸ As discussed in the previous chapter, the City Council had recently failed to adopt a motion to install water mains in the kampong. The Councillors, which knew the kampong to be a serious fire risk, ‘didn’t expect the fire to come so soon, while we were arguing about standpipes’.¹⁰⁹ J. Angus, who ordered several hydrants to be turned off to raise the water pressure, explained that the pressure was low as no mains had been laid in the area and that the question of ‘whether this was a main road had still to be settled’.¹¹⁰ At 3.01 pm, the fire was finally subdued. Among the fire victims were Samuel Seetoh and his family of ten; their wooden house in Si Kah Teng was gutted by the fire, although they managed to save their precious sewing machine and some important personal documents.¹¹¹

¹⁰³ *ST*, 16 Feb 1959.

¹⁰⁴ *ST*, 14 Feb 1959.

¹⁰⁵ *ST*, 25 Feb 1959.

¹⁰⁶ FD, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 4; CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1959*, 3 Mar 1959, pp. 10-11.

¹⁰⁷ Author’s interview with Ho Kok Hoe, 6 Feb 2007.

¹⁰⁸ *ST*, 14 Feb 1959.

¹⁰⁹ Author’s interview with Ho Kok Hoe, 6 Feb 2007.

¹¹⁰ *ST*, 14 Feb 1959.

¹¹¹ Singapore, *Report of the Hawkers Inquiry Commission* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1950), p. 8.



Plate 4.1: Ho Kok Hoe's impression of the 1959 Kampong Tiong Bahru fire, highlighting the themes of 'destruction and rising hope' (Courtesy of Ho Kok Hoe).

In 1959, when the Ong Eng Guan group resigned from the City Council to contest the Legislative Assembly elections, Tang Peng Yeu, the new Council chairman and a member of the Singapore People's Alliance, pointed out, 'The disastrous fire of Lorong 3 [Kampong Koo Chye] and Kampong Tiong Bahru should show to the people of Singapore whether the Mayor and his PAP Councillors have taken steps during the 15 months in the Council to minimise the fire risk in kampongs'.¹¹² Despite this, the Fire Brigade claimed in 1960 that the kampong fire hazard was 'being gradually reduced' as the kampongs themselves were being developed.¹¹³ This prediction, which failed to say how the Brigade would contain an actual fire outbreak, turned out in any case to be a false belief and prophecy.

The six great fires of the 1950s tell us much about the nature of state-urban kampong society relations. While the authorities received a fair share of criticism for not installing water mains or sufficient fire hydrants near the urban kampongs, they could rightly point to major efforts in acquiring water tenders and forming volunteer fire-fighting squads. Kampong dwellers were, conversely, accused of lacking awareness of the fire hazard, panicking during a fire and failing to promptly call the

¹¹² Speech by Tang Peng Yeu, 30 Apr 1959, in CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1959*. The Singapore People's Alliance was newly-formed out of the Labour Front.

¹¹³ FD, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 10.

Brigade. Such damning allegations were in part an attempt by a colonial administration, which regarded unauthorised wooden housing as a ‘necessary but diminishing evil’, to blame someone else, namely, the urban poor, and distance itself from a deteriorating social and housing situation on the urban periphery.

The fundamental problem was the possible rapid spread of fire among closely-built wooden dwellings and was, consequently, political in nature. ‘Natural’ forces such as a strong wind, scorching heat and hilly or swampy terrain complicated the fire risk and were beyond human control. Inadequate water supply – a failure of administration as much as a factor of terrain – plagued fire-fighters. However, in the Geylang Lorongs, the fire engines could pump water from the Kallang River at a reasonably high pressure but, even with the water tenders in action, the Lorongs were frequently devastated by uncontrollable conflagrations. Consequently, a fire which occurred among wooden housing in inaccessible urban areas and under hot windy conditions and was a recipe for disaster, defeating the best efforts of the fire-fighters. Alertness to the presence of fire, as the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* pointed out, could also not be maintained every day of the year.¹¹⁴ The infernos at Tiong Bahru and Bukit Ho Swee occurred despite the combined efforts of the professionals and part-timers. Obviously, it was crucial, then, to prevent the rapid spread of the flames in an urban kampong. If the Fire Brigade was notified promptly, and had at its disposal enough water tenders, good water pressure at the site and the residents’ full cooperation, the damage might significantly be reduced. But to effectively cope with the kampong fire hazard, fire lanes had to be constructed,¹¹⁵ something the authorities had evidently failed to do, either by implementing social control from above or by engaging the kampong dwellers from below to create the lanes.

Living with Fire

If kampong fires were difficult to control, how did the innumerable kampong dwellers live with the daily fire hazard? The Fire Brigade, in lauding its initiative in

¹¹⁴ *SCJP*, 5 Mar 1959.

¹¹⁵ Author’s interview with William S. W. Lim, 25 Oct 2006.

establishing the fire-fighting squads, painted a negative picture of the average kampong dweller:

Prior to the formation of kampong fire parties there was practically no one in the least fire-minded and when a fire did occur the tendency was for kampong dwellers to snatch up their most valued possessions and run to safety. It never occurred to them to attempt to extinguish the fire which in many instances could have easily been done while in its incipient stage; neither was any thought given to calling the Brigade until the fire had gained a firm hold. However, since the advent of the fire parties the situation has changed, numerous small fires which may well have developed into serious outbreaks have been dealt with; the Brigade was called but on arrival found the situation well in hand and beyond ensuring that the fire was entirely extinguished, there was no need for their services.¹¹⁶

Such official statements by a public institution which was itself unable to deal adequately with the growing fire hazard were self-serving. According to fire officer Arthur Lim, kampong fires tended to occur on auspicious occasions such as the Lunar New Year, when youngsters set off fire crackers, or the Hungry Ghosts Festival during the 7th Moon, with the widespread burning of joss sticks and paper.¹¹⁷ Admittedly, given how far the fire hazard was culturally embedded in everyday kampong life, it was difficult to prevent acts which appeared to be due to ‘carelessness’ or ‘negligence’ by the residents. It was certainly possible to ‘forget’ to blow out a candle when one left a wooden house,¹¹⁸ while kampong children in their unsupervised play commonly aimed fire crackers and sky rockets at attap roofs. As a kid, Wang Ah Tee revealed how a cruel childhood prank could backfire with dire consequences for all concerned, for ‘during the Chinese New Year, we could get a big packet of fire crackers for 10 cents. We would catch some rats, pour petrol on

¹¹⁶ FD, *Annual Report 1958*, p. 10.

¹¹⁷ OHC, interview with Arthur Lim Beng Lock, 7 Jan 1994.

¹¹⁸ Author’s interview with Lim Yock Eng, 21 Feb 2006.

them and burn them, and then they ran onto the attap roof. Die! Because we didn't know [the risk] then'.¹¹⁹

Nevertheless, kampong dwellers, if unable to fully prevent or subdue a fire, were not necessarily ignorant about the hazard or how to respond to such an event. As one resident explained, because they knew that the wooden houses burned easily, 'their level of alertness was very high'.¹²⁰ To Joyce Soh, 'living in a kampong, the only thing we were afraid of was fire'.¹²¹ Soh Boon Quee (born in 1945), who lived in the southern side of Si Kah Teng, agreed that as '火不会认识你跟我' ('The fire would not distinguish between you and me'), every home was afraid, because once a fire broke out, it might get out of control'.¹²² Lee Soo Seong remembered an old lady in Bukit Ho Swee, his neighbour, who used to berate the children playing with fire crackers.¹²³ In the kampong, 'fire is a very public thing', as Chua Beng Huat explained, 'One thing you were always vigilant about was fire. As soon as there was fire, everybody just screamed and yelled. Instantly. As soon as there was fire, the first thing most able-bodied young people would do was try to put out the fire'.¹²⁴

As with other 'undesirable' aspects of kampong life such as the 'filth' and 'danger', low-income Chinese accepted fire as part of their everyday life in a way which appeared to outsiders as complacent. Tan Ah Kok put it succinctly, 'We did not know enough about fire to be afraid'.¹²⁵ On the ambivalent attitude of Kampong Henderson residents towards the fire hazard, Joyce Horsley commented:

I don't think they were aware [of the fire hazard]. I suppose they took life as OK, they had no idea that they were likely to have fire. Or if they had, they thought they were prepared to cope with it. They all, I suppose, had to be on their guard. They lived from day to day. Of

¹¹⁹ Author's interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007.

¹²⁰ Author's interview with Lee Wai Ying, 21 Feb 2006.

¹²¹ Author's interview with Joyce Soh, 5 Apr 2007.

¹²² Author's interview with Soh Boon Quee, 4 Feb 2007.

¹²³ OHC, interview with Lee Soo Seong, 19 Nov 1996.

¹²⁴ Author's interview with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006.

¹²⁵ Author's interview with Tan Ah Kok, 22 Mar 2007.

course they were quite careful in what they did, hoping that nothing would happen. I suppose they accepted it like that.¹²⁶

In the event of fire, the kampong dwellers' first instinct was to save what mattered most to them – their family and possessions – rather than to attempt to fight the flames. This attitude and response applied equally to both men and women. Yap Kuai Yong, who stayed near the City Gas Works, recalled that 'when someone in the kampong shouted "Fire!", we were very frightened and would rush out of the house to see where it was, holding tightly to our children. When someone set off fire crackers, we were so afraid of fire, everyone, not just us'.¹²⁷

To some degree, kampong dwellers took precautions to minimise the fire risk, such as making sure to extinguish their oil lamps at night.¹²⁸ According to Tay Bok Chiu, 'if we were burning joss papers, we had to be careful, we had to take the responsibility to be around until the burning was over'.¹²⁹ Lily Wee, being the eldest child in the family, lived with the 'phobia' of fire in Henderson: she had to plan how to evacuate her seven younger siblings to safety in the event of a fire at night. Following the Bukit Ho Swee fire, she developed a 'survival skill': 'when people were burning joss papers and joss sticks, I would take the water hose and spray the attap in case of fire. I was in Secondary 1 then so it was common sense: wet with water so fire would not burn the attap'.¹³⁰ Why fire was readily accepted as part of kampong life was also partly due to the ease of rebuilding wooden houses. In contrast to the official depiction of kampong dwellers as being 'fire passive', following the Joo Chiat fire of May 1959, which destroyed fifty wooden houses in the Joo Chiat-Tembeling Road area, the newspapers reported two days later that the fire victims 'lost no time' in rebuilding their burnt-out homes.¹³¹

The social organisation of the volunteer fire-fighting squads necessarily drew upon the strong fabric of kampong community life and its loose economic structure. Chua Beng Huat observed that a '[c]ollective vigilance was always maintained

¹²⁶ Author's interview with Joyce Horsley, 3 Nov 2007.

¹²⁷ Author's interview with Yap Kuai Yong, 16 Jun 2007.

¹²⁸ Author's interview with Lim Soo Hiang, 2 Jan 2008.

¹²⁹ Author's interview with Tay Bok Chiu, 24 Jan 2007.

¹³⁰ Author's interview with Lily Wee, 3 Jun 2007.

¹³¹ SS, 26 May 1959.

against the apprehension of the villagers, namely, fire. At the slightest indication of fire breaking out, the village men were there attempting to put it out rather than rushing home to help their own families prepare for evacuation'. According to Chua, it was the unemployed young men such as the secret society gangsters who frequently provided the 'free labour' for these dangerous relief efforts.¹³² To the young men at least, fire was perceived as a threat to the kampong, much like hostile intruders. Ng Meng Cheng, for example, who as a girl lived briefly in an attap house built over the Kallang River from 1959 to 1961, was frequently awakened at night by fire alarms, most of which turned out to be false alarms. Once, however, when a fire broke out in her home after her mother forgot to put out an insect repellent joss stick before going out, their neighbours helped to extinguish the flames.¹³³

Arson, as Table 4.3 shows, was not a major cause of fire in the official statistics, usually constituting 1-2% of the total number of fires in Singapore. However, the colonial authorities viewed arson largely within the Cold War paradigm of counter-insurgency; it was conflated with 'incendiarism' and, in the official mind, associated with attacks by the Malayan Communist Party on industrial, commercial and public buildings.¹³⁴ As Arthur Lim stated, the 1950s and 1960s were 'prominent years' with communists carrying out numerous acts of arson.¹³⁵ Reported cases of arson and incendiarism were highest in 1950 (70 cases), 1956 (51) and 1964 (58) – years in which riots took place in Singapore.¹³⁶ Moreover, without a comprehensive police investigation and the cooperation of witnesses in the kampong, it was difficult to distinguish between arson and other causes of fire; a 'light thrown down', for instance, could belie an act of arson. Arson directed against wooden dwellings was consequently both under-reported and under-investigated because of the social and political distance between urban kampong dwellers and officials of the state. The widely-held perception among some fire-fighters that Bukit Ho Swee

¹³² Chua Beng Huat, 'The Business of Living in Singapore', in Kernial S. Sandhu and Paul Wheatley (eds), *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), p. 1008; author's interview with Chua Beng Huat, 26 Oct 2006.

¹³³ OHC, interview with Qian Hua, 11 Aug 2005.

¹³⁴ See for instance the Aik Hoe Rubber Factory fire of July 1950. FD, *Annual Report 1961*, pp. 4-8; Joan Hon, *100 Years of the Singapore Fire Service* (Singapore: Produced & published for Singapore Fire Service by Times Books International, 1988), pp. 64-65, 67.

¹³⁵ OHC, interview with Arthur Lim Beng Lock, 7 Jan 1994.

¹³⁶ Referring to the 1950 Maria Hertogh, October 1956 and 1964 race riots.

was full of 'bad people' was markedly similar to the attitude that other members of officialdom held towards the residents of urban kampongs.¹³⁷

Contrary to the commonly-held views of the authorities, kampong dwellers in the 1950s frequently considered fire as an act of arson committed by landlords, the government, hired secret society hands, or a spiteful neighbour. As development projects increasingly encroached onto areas of unauthorised wooden housing, fire came to be readily associated with clearance in the minds of kampong dwellers. 'It was always like that', they ventured years later, 'There was eviction and people did not want to move. After a while, fire broke out'.¹³⁸ Such beliefs were not pure speculation but rather based, ostensibly, on first-hand accounts, and possessed of an internal logic. One kampong dweller apparently had witnessed how 'someone put fuel into a Pepsi-Cola bottle and threw it onto a roof', insisting, 'I saw it with my own eyes'.¹³⁹ Another had 'seen a piece of cloth tied up with a metal wire and thrown onto the attap. We retrieved this thing. Someone had thrown it'.¹⁴⁰ Fire at night was supposedly common in the urban kampongs in the 1950s, 'many times, once or twice a week sometimes. Sometimes at night we had to move our things because someone was setting fire. We didn't call the police! They had run off so it was useless to call the police. They were trying to evict the residents, and since they didn't want to leave, they tried to set fire'.¹⁴¹ Another kampong dweller in the 1950s 'knew a friend who belonged to this type of gang, they would set fire to attap houses because when the landowner bought over the land, there were people who refused to be evicted, so they played dirty tricks'.¹⁴²

In the conspiratorial logic of arson, fire was always accompanied by suspicious circumstances: 'people were saying that the fire engines arrived late or that there was no water, or that the fire engines were far away from the fire and were not really trying to fight the flames'.¹⁴³ The power of the belief in arson lay in the fact that it could not easily be proved or disproved. The large scale of destruction, in

¹³⁷ OHC, interview with Jaafar Sabar, 29 Jul 1987.

¹³⁸ Author's interview with Maggie Chong, 13 Feb 2007.

¹³⁹ Author's interview with Maggie Chong, 13 Feb 2007.

¹⁴⁰ Author's interview with Goh Ah Mong, 24 May 2007.

¹⁴¹ Author's interview with Lim Teck Sim, 11 May 2007.

¹⁴² Author's interview with Johnny Ang, 30 Jun 2007.

¹⁴³ Author's interview with Lim Yew Kuan, 21 Nov 2006.

marked contrast to the minimum loss of lives in most kampong fires, appeared to establish the case for a well-crafted plan, that ‘whenever there was resettlement, there was arson and no one got hurt’.¹⁴⁴ When three kampong fires broke out within the space of a week in 1956, one of which was attributed to arson, a Chinese newspaper called for a thorough police investigation into the cause of the fire so as to ‘allay suspicion and give peace to the public’.¹⁴⁵ Public allegations of arson indicated a genuine wariness of the government, borne out of feelings of uncertainty among people dwelling in unauthorised wooden houses at the edge of society, in a decade marked by social transition and transformation.

Arson was consequently a major political issue; it was a powerful sign and symbol among urban kampong dwellers which appeared to signify why their wooden homes could be reduced to ashes overnight. Rural activists like Poh Soon Seng of the Singapore Country People’s Association, who lived in kampongs in the countryside, stated that ‘every time there was a fire, people would say it was the government or the landlord who did it’. He maintained that, while the ‘eyewitness accounts’ might not always be reliable, ‘logically speaking, a single fire could settle many problems’, ‘because attap houses were built so closely together, it would be very difficult, be it for the government or the landlord, to deal with them. They had been around for decades so you couldn’t easily evict them. To move these people, the compensation would also have been huge’. As Poh explained, ‘If the landlord wanted it done’, ‘he would pay a person to throw a torch onto the houses as the risk of getting caught was low. There were people willing to do this’.¹⁴⁶ The PAP left utilised arson as an issue to challenge the colonial establishment and mobilise kampong dwellers. According to Poh, the opposition encouraged the popular belief in arson to win votes and embarrass the regime in power.¹⁴⁷ C. C. Chin, who was involved in the SCPA and the Singapore Rural Residents’ Association, observed that fires in kampongs built on land belonging to private landowners were conveniently ‘blamed on the government because they were considered as collaborators with the

¹⁴⁴ Author’s interview with C. C. Chin, 21 Nov 2006.

¹⁴⁵ *NFWP*, 17 Jul 1956.

¹⁴⁶ Author’s interview with Poh Soon Seng, 19 Sep 2006.

¹⁴⁷ Author’s interview with Poh Soon Seng, 19 Sep 2006.

government in carrying out development'. Both rural associations consequently issued statements condemning arson in cases of fire.¹⁴⁸

The way in which low-income Chinese living in unauthorised wooden housing either accepted the fire hazard as part of daily life or attributed major blazes to acts of arson committed by private landowners or the government demonstrated the fundamentally social and political nature of the problem of kampong fires. The central difficulty in the end was not logistical, financial or technological; it was not about having more fire engines, hydrants, telephones, or even funds. The fire hazard underlined both the inability and unwillingness of the colonial establishment to ultimately assist the kampong dwellers to maintain their own way of life, by providing less combustible housing, accessible approach lanes and adequate fire breaks. As the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* explained after the 1959 Tiong Bahru fire, 'prevention in the time of safety is better than remedy after the disaster'.¹⁴⁹ The authorities had carried out a brief period of engagement at the grassroots level when the People's Action Party controlled the City Council, culminating in the creation of the fire-fighting squads. But this pragmatic initiative, underpinned by a desire to win votes in view of the general elections in 1959, was politically expedient. As for the welfare of the kampong dwellers, upon coming to power, the PAP's solution to the urban fire hazard turned out to be markedly similar to that of the colonial government's.

¹⁴⁸ Author's interview with C. C. Chin, 24 Nov 2006.

¹⁴⁹ *SCJP*, 20 Feb 1959.

Chapter 5

Fire Emergency

Fire commanded a central place in the state's emergency programme of clearance and resettlement of the urban kampongs in the 1950s. The urban kampong fires were not merely products of social and material developments but also a potentially powerful political force. This was the case for the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee inferno but also, to a lesser extent, the kampong blazes which preceded it. As seemingly 'non-political', 'natural' urban emergencies, the fires provided a substantive rationale and proof for the official discourse and policy of urban kampong clearance. The fires also constituted both an organisational challenge for the British colonial and Labour Front governments to provide relief for the fire victims and a pragmatic opportunity to expand its administrative reach into the semi-autonomous areas, towards realising its vision of a modern Singapore. Fire could empower the authorities with a moral and social authority to redevelop the fire site if they were able to register the fire victims and shelter them temporarily in a clearly-demarcated area before moving them more permanently into regulated housing.

In this context, emergency public housing appeared closely in conjunction with the kampong blazes of postwar Singapore. Such housing was built below municipal by-law standards and differed from permanent housing in lacking a reinforced concrete frame.¹ They were consequently semi-permanent and could last only 40-50 years compared to 60-100 years for permanent housing and 20-25 years for wooden housing.² The emergency housing could be built quickly for fire victims and serve as an important platform by which a devastated settlement of unauthorised houses could be socially, economically and politically transformed. This chapter examines the impact of the six great postwar fires previously discussed on the provision of emergency relief and emergency housing for the fire victims. The responses of the British colonial and Labour Front administrations to these crises,

¹ HB 188/59, Report for the information of the Commission of Inquiry into the Building Industry by Chief Architect, HDB, 30 Mar 1960.

² HB 477/53, Supplementary report to report titled 'Housing' by the Planning Coordination Committee, undated, c. 1959.

while not altogether successful, provide an important insight to the People's Action Party government's reaction to the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire, which should be understood as building upon previous colonial efforts. In his recent study of the great 1953 Shek Kip Mei fire in Hong Kong, widely accepted as giving birth to the colony's public housing programme, Alan Smart analysed the British emergency housing programme in the aftermath of smaller fires both before and after Shek Kip Mei. Smart discovered that the British public housing policy in Hong Kong was 'a learning process punctuated by a continuing series of crises'.³ The application of a similar approach to the postwar fires of Singapore enables us to understand the historical role of the Bukit Ho Swee inferno in a parallel context.

'Not prepared to live far from their work', Kampong Bugis, 1951

The Kampong Bugis inferno of 1 August 1951 was followed by an organised relief effort for the estimated 3,000 fire victims, with the government and voluntary organisations working in tandem. The Social Welfare Department hailed the disaster as 'the spark which ignited universal public interest in the provision of relief for the victims of fire and other disasters in Singapore'.⁴ The Department had an established procedure for rendering assistance to persons made homeless by social emergencies such as fires, floods and the collapse of buildings.⁵ In the event of a Major Civil Disaster, which included large kampong fires, the police would notify the SWD to promptly commence its emergency relief work.⁶

Chinese newspapers and organisations, such as the Malayan Chinese Association, Chinese Chambers of Commerce, Blue Cross, and the Buddhist Association, actively organised relief efforts for the fire victims under the SWD's umbrella of coordination. On 13 August, leading charitable organisations met to establish a Singapore Joint Relief Organisation (SJRO) to provide for the immediate relief and resettlement of the fire victims, and to assist the victims of future disasters.

³ Alan Smart, *The Shek Kip Mei Myth: Squatters, Fires and Colonial Rulers in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), p. 189.

⁴ SWD, *Annual Report 1951*, p. 2.

⁵ SWD, *Annual Report 1946*, p. 46.

⁶ SWD 130/57, Radio Division Standing Order No 83: Social Welfare Department Assistance to Homeless and Distressed, 9 Feb 1954.

The SWD, in sponsoring the SJRO, hailed it as ‘a notable step in the social history of Singapore’.⁷ The Department explained that it was not trying to take over the relief work but, rather, to advise the public and ‘streamline the activities’.⁸ The Department distributed relief payments of up to a maximum of \$20 per family, a small amount compared to the \$400 monthly salary of an average low-income household in the 1950s.⁹ The SWD also offered temporary accommodation in Nantina Home and Bushey Park Home, homes for the destitute and the aged. But the fire victims found these institutions too far from their workplace and preferred to stay with their friends and relatives.¹⁰ Most victims spent their first night after the fire out in the open on the five-foot-way.¹¹

The Singapore Improvement Trust registered 317 fire victim families for temporary accommodation, out of which 63% had large families of five or more persons.¹² Eventually, only a score of families accepted the barrack-type SIT accommodation at the far end of the Malay Settlement at Jalan Eunus. The area was serviced by a bus route, but, as the SIT conceded, ‘some way out of town’ from Kampong Bugis. The fire victims were mostly Cantonese-speaking carpenters and mechanics from the sawmills and factories in the locality. They were either long-established residents or had moved into the area when a tannery became defunct twenty years earlier.¹³ Among the 317 families, only 24 earned more than \$300 a month, while 241 families earned \$200 or less, well below the \$400-low-income poverty line drawn by Goh Keng Swee in his 1956 study.¹⁴ It was estimated that 80 out of the 127 families of five or more persons seeking SIT accommodation could afford a monthly rent of \$25, 29 families could afford \$30, and only 18 families could afford \$50.¹⁵ The SIT also realised that ‘Chinese of the labouring class are not

⁷ SS, 17 Aug 1951. George Webb, Secretary for Chinese Affairs, was appointed the SJRO’s Chairman.

⁸ ST, 11 Aug 1951.

⁹ SIT 1231/53, Memo from Estates Officer, SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 4 Dec 1953; Goh Keng Swee, *Urban Incomes and Housing: A Report on the Social Survey of Singapore, 1953-54* (Singapore: Department of Social Welfare, 1956).

¹⁰ SWD, *Annual Report 1951*, p. 28. The Bushey Park Home offered communal, barrack-type accommodation while the Nantina Home, a former hotel, provided greater privacy of living.

¹¹ ST, 3 Aug 1951.

¹² SIT 1231/53, Memo from Estates Officer, SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 4 Dec 1953.

¹³ SS, 2 Aug 1951.

¹⁴ SIT 1231/53, Memo from Estates Officer, SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 4 Dec 1953; Goh, *Urban Incomes and Housing*.

¹⁵ SIT 1231/53, Memo from Estates Officer, SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 4 Dec 1953.

prepared to live far from their work',¹⁶ and that at least 20% of the fire victims would reject its accommodation, mainly because the rents were too high.¹⁷

The authorities struggled to find suitable permanent accommodation for the fire victims. Municipal Commissioners A. P. Rajah of the Progressive Party (South ward) and Syed Mohamed bin Abdul Hameed Chisty of the Labour Party (Rochor) emphasised the need to prevent the fire victims from rebuilding on the fire site and called upon the government to provide land for them to build houses with proper drainage and water facilities.¹⁸ Less than two weeks after the fire, however, George Webb, Secretary for Chinese Affairs, had already observed 'huts and shacks' being built on the site.¹⁹ At the end of August, Webb, as Chairman of the SJRO, announced that the relief fund would be held in reserve for rehousing fire victims.²⁰ George Pepler, the Town Planning Adviser, also proposed that the building work be carefully directed.²¹ He had earlier in the year recommended the building of emergency housing in the City for rehousing 'squatters'. But his suggestion had been rejected by the SIT after a lengthy discussion as 'uneconomical' and 'not desirable', with the Trust only prepared to erect such housing in rural areas.²² When an earlier blaze had devastated some wooden houses off Lavender Street in May 1951, the SIT, when asked to rehouse the fire victims, decided, 'The Trust cannot concern itself with emergency housing but it will endeavour to provide permanent housing, to be allocated in accordance with the Points System'.²³

Consequently, it was the local community-based organisations, not the government, which undertook to rehouse the fire victims. On 5 August, the MCA, Chinese Chambers of Commerce and the Buddhist Association, having agreed to use the relief fund to build barrack-type housing for the fire victims, asked the

¹⁶ SIT 808/50, Memo titled 'Resettlement' by Commissioner of Lands and Acting Secretary for Social Welfare, 16 Jul 1952.

¹⁷ SIT 1231/53, Minutes of Board Meeting, 9 Dec 1953.

¹⁸ *ST*, 3 Aug 1951.

¹⁹ *ST*, 11 Aug 1951.

²⁰ *ST*, 30 Aug 1951.

²¹ *ST*, 2 Aug 1951.

²² SIT 952/50, Notes of Meeting of Chairman, SIT, Commissioner of Lands, Manager, SIT, and George Pepler on 9 Jan 1951.

²³ HB 795/51, Memo from Assistant Estates Officer, SIT, to Secretary, SWD, 20 Jul 1951.

government for land for that purpose.²⁴ Three days later, the Attap Dwellings Special Committee also recommended that the government consider proposals to build streets, drains and services at the site, where the MCA would erect houses for the fire victims. But on 14 August, the Municipal Commission decided to defer further consideration of the proposal.²⁵ Instead, MCA and Chinese Chambers of Commerce representatives, and, several Municipal Commissioners visited thirty acres of Crown land off Kolam Ayer Lane, northeast of the fire site, as a possible housing site.²⁶ On 16 August, the SJRO announced that it would build 300 3-room houses at Kolam Ayer. Each dwelling, similar to artisans' quarters and costing \$3,000, could house a family of 6-8 persons.²⁷

By the end of 1953, the SJRO had only completed 96 terrace houses – a mere third of its initial pledge. Although the \$10 monthly rent was heavily subsidised by the relief fund, the houses lacked proper sanitation – testimony to the lack of adequate work by the City Council – and were not in demand. On 3 November, a five-man delegation claiming to represent the fire victims asked the SJRO, since the vacant houses could not accommodate all the families, to sell them and distribute the proceeds to the fire victims.²⁸ Given the substantial time lapse that had occurred since the fire, most victims had found new homes on their own. The SIT estimated that, by December 1953, 'less than 50%' of the fire victims had re-established themselves at Kampong Bugis,²⁹ with the rest having moved elsewhere.³⁰ This failure to swiftly rehouse fire victims, which also recurred in subsequent kampong fires, only increased the drift of low-income Chinese families into the urban kampongs and worsened the fire hazard. The Trust was to soon realise that fire victims frequently refused its accommodation due to high rents or other personal reasons.³¹ The Fire Superintendent's list of urban kampongs by fire risk in 1954 (see previous chapter) cites a rebuilt Kampong Bugis at No. 13. The failure to adequately

²⁴ SS, 5 Aug 1951.

²⁵ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1951*, 14 Aug 1951, pp. 14-15. The Public Works Committee agreed to the Special Attap Dwellings Committee's recommendation, but the Public Utilities Committee had not made its decision by that day.

²⁶ SS, 10 Aug 1951.

²⁷ ST, 16 Aug 1951; SS, 17 Aug 1951.

²⁸ ST, 5 Nov 1953; ST, 6 Nov 1953.

²⁹ SIT 1231/53, Minutes of Board Meeting, 9 Dec 1953.

³⁰ SIT 1231/53, Memo from Chairman, SIT, to the Colonial Secretary, 17 Dec 1953.

³¹ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1958*, 20 May 1958, p. 424.

rehouse the Kampong Bugis fire victims in light of the scale of the disaster was stunning.

‘14-day wonder’, Geylang Lorong 3, 1953

In marked contrast to the Kampong Bugis fire, the authorities acted far more decisively to rehouse the 2,385 victims of the Lorong 3 fire on 16 July 1953. Some 1,000 fire victims were temporarily placed in an empty Lee Rubber godown nearby. The SWD’s Public Assistance Section registered the fire victims and distributed relief payments to them on behalf of the SJRO. Four days later, the SJRO also handed out from public donations \$20 to each fire victim. The amount was significantly larger than in the case of the Kampong Bugis fire; consequently, it was stated in the press that large families obtained more relief than the savings they had lost in the fire.³² Governor John Nicoll, upon visiting the fire site, told T. P. F. McNeice, President of the City Council, ‘Now that this land is cleared, we must build proper houses on it at once’.³³ The day after the fire, the SIT’s heads of departments held an emergency meeting to formulate a rehousing plan.³⁴ The Manager of the Trust, J. M. Fraser, stated that the fire site must be acquired and cleared immediately to prevent the victims from rebuilding on it.³⁵ Top Trust officials privately felt that the fire was a blessing in disguise and intimated ‘it is fortunate that the occurrence of the fire at Lorong 3 resulted in the decrease in the area of so-called self-help building as otherwise we would have a bigger problem than does in fact exist’.³⁶

There was little alternative housing available for the Geylang victims, although 33 families moved into Norfolk Estate, south of Toa Payoh, at the end of August. The SIT consequently issued permits to six families to reconstruct wooden houses on the fire site in July and August. While the Trust tried to keep ‘squatters’

³² *ST*, 20 Jul 1953.

³³ *ST*, 17 Jul 1953.

³⁴ HB 600/53, Report on Action Taken in Conjunction with Rehousing Victims of the Lorong 3 Fire, 31 Jul 1953.

³⁵ SIT 601/53, Memo titled ‘Kallang Basin Fire Relief Scheme’ by Manager, SIT, 17 Jul 1953.

³⁶ HB 808/1/50, Memo from Acting Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, to Manager, SIT, 20 Oct 1953.

off the site, this became increasingly difficult.³⁷ At the end of November, by which time its low-cost houses for the fire victims, discussed below, had been completed, the SIT decided to demolish the wooden houses.³⁸ In October, the Lorong 3 fire site was gazetted for 190 units of 2-storey low-rental housing, the first time in the 1950s when a fire site was acquired for the construction of public housing.³⁹

Prior to the Lorong 3 fire, however, the SIT had continued to resist pressure to build temporary housing, particularly 1-room emergency housing, in the City. In 1953, it reiterated 'the policy of the Trust to build good substantial buildings which could be amortised over sixty years'. '[T]he short term palliative', the Trust emphasised, 'is neither economical nor an answer to a long-term problem'.⁴⁰ Building costs, however, mitigated against the effective implementation of this policy. The SIT was unable to build permanent housing in the City at monthly rentals under \$40, which, it realised, were far too expensive for low-income families earning less than \$200 a month. The solution, the Trust proposed in June 1953, was to construct semi-permanent, low-rental housing at \$20 rentals just outside City limits.⁴¹ Immediately prior to the Lorong 3 fire, the SIT had erected 25 prototype low-cost terrace houses at the Upper Aljunied resettlement area (also known as 'Aljunied Road North', two miles from Lorong 3).⁴² The housing was similar in design to the Trust's artisan quarters, built with concrete, wood and corrugated asbestos and had a life span of twenty years.⁴³

The scale of this low-cost programme grew following the Lorong 3 fire. From 22 July, the SIT registered a total of 218 fire victim families for rehousing. Using the Upper Aljunied prototype,⁴⁴ and money from the Squatter Resettlement

³⁷ HB 650/53, Memo from Chairman, SIT, to the Colonial Secretary, 15 Oct 1953.

³⁸ HB 600/53, Memo from Acting Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, to Estates Officer, SIT, 30 Nov 1953.

³⁹ HB 477/53, Revised Building Programme No. 7, 15 Feb 1954.

⁴⁰ SIT, *Annual Report 1953*, p. 9.

⁴¹ HB 477/53, Minutes of Board Meeting, 17 Jun 1953.

⁴² SIT 808/2/50, Memo from 2nd Assistant Secretary, SIT, to Secretary, SIT, 25 Jul 1953; and Minutes of Trust Meeting, 17 Jun 1953.

⁴³ HB 808/1/50, Memo from Acting Deputy Lands Manager, SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 21 Jul 1953.

⁴⁴ HB 600/53, Memo from Chief Architect, SIT, to Manager, SIT, 31 Jul 1953.



Plate 5.1: Prototype emergency housing at Kolam Ayer. Source: SIT, *Annual Report 1953*.

fund,⁴⁵ the Trust began building more than 300 units of single-storey, semi-permanent, low-cost housing, each costing \$2,000, comprising 190 2-room units at \$22 per month rental at Upper Aljunied Road resettlement area and 136 3-room units at \$26 rental on Crown land at Kolam Ayer Lane, formerly a swamp which had been land filled by the City Council and was used as a dumping ground.⁴⁶ The Upper Aljunied contract, which began on 28 July, was targeted for completion within 2½ months, with a minimum of 50 houses to be constructed by the end of August and at least another 50 before the end of September.⁴⁷ Earthworks visible at the site, which began at the end of August, was hailed by the press, counting back from the day of the fire, as a '14-day wonder'.⁴⁸ Despite initial complaints that the contract was badly organised, the standard of workmanship 'hopeless' and the quality of materials used poor,⁴⁹ the work improved markedly by October.⁵⁰ At Kolam Ayer, the SIT commenced building even though the consolidation and settlement of the filled land was not yet complete, because 'the whole essence of the scheme was speed'.⁵¹ Both building contracts were completed within three months. Small families were allowed to share a house, with the minimum number of persons

⁴⁵ SIT 601/53, Memo by Chairman, SIT, to the Colonial Secretary, 21 Jul 1953.

⁴⁶ SIT 638/53, Memo from Architect, SIT, to Chief Architect, SIT, 1 Apr 1957.

⁴⁷ HB 477/53, Memo on Financial Provisions for Squatter Resettlement and Low Rent Housing Scheme, undated, c. 1953.

⁴⁸ SS, 30 July 1953.

⁴⁹ HB 600/53, Memo from Assistant Architect, SIT, to Chief Architect, SIT, 26 Aug 1953.

⁵⁰ HB 600/53, Report on Progress of Relief Housing Scheme by the Assistant Architect, SIT, 1 Oct 1953.

⁵¹ SIT 638/53, Memo from Architect, SIT, to Chief Architect, SIT, 1 Apr 1957.

for each unit stipulated at five.⁵² In late August, just five weeks after the fire, the Lorong 3 fire victims began moving into the first 50 houses completed. For one of them, Chong Chai Koi, a textile shop assistant with a wife and two children who had lost everything in the fire, the \$22 rental was high. But relief payments from the SJRO and help from relatives and friends enabled him to buy \$600's worth of new possessions.⁵³ Chong happily proclaimed, 'I now think that the fire was a blessing, for I never dreamed of living in such a modern house'.⁵⁴

The SIT's decision to build the emergency housing was a significant measure, no longer confining low-rental housing to rural areas but also permitting such accommodation in 'suitable areas' in the City.⁵⁵ The houses were the first constructed by the government for victims of a major fire and were manifestly of a emergency design.⁵⁶ Subsequently, the SIT built more semi-permanent housing at low monthly rentals (\$20-25) which could last 40 years for working class families at Upper Aljunied Road as a supplement to its main housing programme.⁵⁷ The Trust was sensitive to the fact that it had crossed an architectural and social boundary, taking care to defend the low-cost housing as 'in no way temporary', being built from precast concrete hollow blocks.⁵⁸

'Units of this type should in future be built only in rural areas', Aljunied Road, 1953

Following the Aljunied Road blaze on 24 October 1953, the SWD temporarily sheltered about 600 of the 1,000-odd fire victims at the nearby Singapore Badminton Hall. Rehousing was far easier in this case, given the measures already taken for the Lorong 3 fire. At the end of the month, some families moved into the emergency housing at Upper Aljunied and Kolam Ayer estates, joining the victims of the earlier fire, with a handful accepting the more expensive housing at Norfolk Estate. By November, the SIT had rehoused 135 Chinese

⁵² HB 600/53, Minutes of Estates Committee Meeting, 26 Aug 1953.

⁵³ SS, 26 Aug 1953.

⁵⁴ ST, 26 Aug 1953.

⁵⁵ HB 477/53, Memo from Manager, SIT, to Chairman, SIT, 4 Aug 1955.

⁵⁶ SIT, *Annual Report 1954*, p. 16.

⁵⁷ SIT, *Annual Report 1953*, pp. 9, 44.

⁵⁸ SIT, *Annual Report 1954*, p. 16.

families, while Malay families were taken care of by the Malay and Arab Unions and Indian families by the Malayan Indian Congress. A rapid response characterised the rehousing programme in both Geylang fires. The Trust reported that, in swiftly rehousing the fire victims, 'the risks taken were merited by the problems confronted and that they were greatly outweighed by the success of the operation and the great amount of public good that was done'.⁵⁹ In the aftermath of the fire, the Aljunied Road site, like the Lorong 3 site previously, was gazetted in December 1953 as part of the Aljunied Road South low-cost housing project.⁶⁰ United States Vice-President Richard Nixon, who had just arrived in Singapore on an official visit, went to the fire site on the day of the fire and predicted, 'There is only one consolation – in this very place another SIT housing estate will rise'.⁶¹

The two Geylang Lorong fires forced the SIT to reassess its role in rehousing fire victims. Initially, even after the Lorong 3 fire, the Trust had been reticent, if not uncertain of this responsibility. In September, when the SIT was asked to take over the management of the 96 SJRO houses at Kolam Ayer Lane built for the victims of the Kampong Bugis fire, J. M. Fraser replied,

If Government is to undertake responsibility for the Kampong Bugis fire victims as it has done in the case of the Geylang fire victims, then I think it would have to undertake responsibility for all victims of future fires. I do not know if Government is prepared to do this. I certainly do not think that the Singapore Improvement Trust can undertake such a responsibility, and any work that the Trust undertook in this connection would clearly have to be as Agents of Government and at Government's expense.

Government, through the Commissioner of Lands, would require to find suitable sites and the Trust would then take over the building and the managements of the houses under similar arrangements as are now being worked out for the Geylang fire victims. This would only

⁵⁹ SIT 1201/53, Memo from Estates Officer, SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 19 Nov 1953.

⁶⁰ SIT 1076/53, Minutes of Board Meeting, 9 Dec 1953.

⁶¹ SS, 25 Oct 1953.

be possible if the Trust had full control and if the SJRO were prepared to hand over complete control of the project, including building, allocation and management, to the SIT.⁶²

In December, however, following the Aljunied Road fire, T. P. F. McNeice, Chairman of the SIT, stated that fire victims in future could register for rehousing and would receive hardship points in their application for Trust housing.⁶³ When the Secretary of Chinese Affairs asked the SIT to purchase the 96 unwanted SJRO houses and distribute the proceeds to the Kampong Bugis fire victims, McNeice went a step further, recommending the SIT take over from the SJRO the responsibility of rehousing the Kampong Bugis fire victims. He preferred the Trust build 250 low-cost houses on Crown land at Guillemard Road in Geylang, which would cost \$100,000 more than buying the SJRO houses. However, McNeice would conceivably persuade the SJRO to surrender the houses to the government:

It is now 2½ years since the fire occurred and most of the families have established themselves elsewhere. A large number of them have returned to their old sites at Kampong Bugis where they have erected huts which are considered to be a serious fire risk. It is felt, therefore, that although the immediate necessity for rehousing the victims of this fire no longer exists, they remain as a housing liability which would not in any way be discharged by the distribution at this time of cash payments. The extent of this liability is estimated at 250 houses, having regard to the fact that some of the victims are successfully resettled elsewhere while some consist of small families who could be accommodated at the rate of two per house.⁶⁴

This proposal caused friction between the SJRO and the government and undermined the SJRO's role in rehousing victims of subsequent fires.⁶⁵ In 1954, when questioning why the government had not bought the SJRO houses, an editorial

⁶² SIT 1231/53, Memo from Manager, SIT, to Chairman, SIT, 29 Sep 1953.

⁶³ SIT 1231/53, Memo from Chairman, SIT, to the Colonial Secretary, 17 Dec 1953.

⁶⁴ SIT 1231/53, Memo from Chairman, SIT, to the Colonial Secretary, 17 Dec 1953.

⁶⁵ It appears from the sources discussed that there was an ongoing power struggle between the SIT and SJRO over the provision of relief for fire victims. I have, however, not been able to find additional material throwing more light on this issue.

in the *Nanyang Siang Pau* demanded, '[W]hy does the Government not render assistance when the SJRO is experiencing difficulties at the crossroads?' The paper went on to bluntly accuse the government of being 'indifferent' towards the plight of the fire victims and that taking over the SJRO houses, which had been built with relief donations, amounted to 'confiscating donations from the public-spirited people and the property of the fire victims'.⁶⁶

But the authorities continued to waver over a broad policy for rehousing fire victims. Finances were a critical stumbling block. After the Aljunied Road fire, the SIT wanted the government to acquire the Kampong Bugis fire site and develop it into an industrial area, since 'the opportunity occurs now to clean up the greater part of the area before it becomes thickly covered with attap buildings'.⁶⁷ The Commissioner of Lands, however, disagreed, explaining that land, valued at \$2 per square feet, was too expensive for low-cost housing.⁶⁸ The SIT was also discouraged by the lack of enthusiasm for the emergency housing, even among homeless fire victims. Following the successful completion of the Upper Aljunied and Kolam Ayer estates, the Trust assumed that it would be asked to expand the emergency housing programme.⁶⁹ However, of the more than 882 families affected by the two Geylang fires, only 415 families accepted the emergency housing and SIT accommodation elsewhere.⁷⁰ This was largely because most of the Lorong 3 fire victims worked in Lee Rubber's factories nearby, who naturally wanted to return to homes close to their workplace.⁷¹

In their reluctance to fully embrace emergency housing, the Trust's European officials were not only concerned with the possible costs entailed but also the problem of regulation and the impact this might have on their international reputations.⁷² As Lee Kuan Yew stated in the Legislative Assembly in 1958, 'their predominant intention was to make sure that what they built did not subsequently

⁶⁶ *NYSP*, 26 Mar 1954.

⁶⁷ SIT 1231/53, Minutes of Board Meeting, 9 Dec 1953.

⁶⁸ SIT 1231/53, Memo from Acting Commissioner of Lands to Chairman, SIT, 5 Feb 1954.

⁶⁹ SIT 1001/52 Vol. I, Preliminary Report of the Architectural Department, 1953.

⁷⁰ SIT, *Annual Report 1953*, p. 54.

⁷¹ SIT 601/53, Memorandum by Manager, SIT, 17 July 1953.

⁷² Author's interview with Ann Wee, 1 Nov 2006.

degenerate into slums'.⁷³ For 1-room housing, maintenance costs were high;⁷⁴ at Kolam Ayer, for example, 'floors, aprons and walls [would] crack and sink, partly causing roof leaks'.⁷⁵ The Upper Aljunied residents, the SIT discovered, soon had transformed the estate into a site of unauthorised activities, constructing unapproved structures like kitchens and dinner areas, using the premises for small-scale business, like preparing hawker food and storing charcoal and firewood, and rearing poultry in the open spaces.⁷⁶ In 1954, SIT planners S. C. Woolmer and D. H. Komlosy deplored the 1- and 2-storey low-rental Trust housing as 'highly undesirable' and 'at best only a palliative which could in the end become a heavy liability, both financially and on health and social grounds'. 'Their appearance', it was added, 'leaves much to be desired, and unless strict control is maintained they will degenerate into slums'.⁷⁷ Disappointed by these negative results, the SIT proposed in 1955 that emergency housing be limited to the rural areas.⁷⁸ The low-cost programme, however, was not completely abolished. The Trust, faced with escalating building costs and shortage of skilled labour in the mid-1950s, continued to 'experiment' with inexpensive housing.⁷⁹ In 1956, it began to build 2- and 3-room units with communal kitchens for the urban redevelopment programme in the Central Area, where the families were reportedly smaller.

'Permitted to rebuild accommodation themselves within the fire area', Kampong Tiong Bahru, 1955

The SWD registered the victims of the Kampong Tiong Bahru fire of 30 September 1955 at nearby Chong Teck Primary School and collaborated in the relief work with other government departments and voluntary organisations like the Blue Cross, Salvation Army, British Red Cross, and St. John's Ambulance.⁸⁰ Of particular note was the raising of more than \$10,000 by the kampong dwellers of

⁷³ SLAD, 10 Sep 1958, p. 742.

⁷⁴ HB 74/59, Memo from Maintenance Officer, SIT, to Chief Architect, SIT, 4 Jul 1959.

⁷⁵ HB 74/59, Memo from Maintenance Officer, HDB, to CEO, HDB, 24 Feb 1960.

⁷⁶ SIT 1124/53, Memo from Assistant Health Officer, SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 6 Nov 1958.

⁷⁷ SIT 617/54, Memo titled 'Housing Programmes and Policy' by Chief Architect, SIT, and Planning Adviser, SIT, 5 Jul 1954.

⁷⁸ SIT, *Annual Report 1955*, p. 20.

⁷⁹ SIT, *Annual Report 1955*, p. 20.

⁸⁰ SWD, *Annual Report 1955*, p. 3.

Tiong Bahru, Silat and Henderson.⁸¹ Each of the 792 fire victims eventually received \$100, a five-fold increase over the relief payment received by the victims of the Lorong 3 fire. The SWD had attempted to establish a single Public Calamity Fund for victims of civil disasters, with representatives from the Singapore, Chinese and Indian Chambers of Commerce, British Red Cross, St. John's Ambulance, Salvation Army, the SJRO, and the press, to expedite the disbursement of relief assistance.⁸² However, the representatives decided in their meeting on 3 October not to establish an overarching common fund but rather a localised Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire Relief Fund.⁸³ The SWD was disappointed, since, ostensibly, victims of smaller fires would now receive much less relief, perhaps as little as \$5 per person.⁸⁴ The Department initially sheltered 93 fire victims at the Kallang Airport Terminal Building located on the eastern side of the City.⁸⁵ The Aerodrome was a considerable distance from Kampong Tiong Bahru and underlined the real difficulty of rehousing fire victims southwest of the Singapore River. Despite this problem, the number of families at the terminal building rose to 280, among whom were numerous children, while a third of the adults were unemployed. But by late October, the number had fallen to 52 families (105 adults and 119 children), and Ko Teck Kin, Chairman of the relief fund, asked the government to rehouse the fire victims.⁸⁶

The government, despite its previous experience with emergency housing in the Geylang fires, failed to do so. The SIT and the Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing had previously agreed that semi-permanent housing could be built in the rural areas at monthly rentals not exceeding \$20.⁸⁷ The SIT estimated that 115 out of the 181 Tiong Bahru fire victim families required about 90 units of low-rental Trust accommodation in the vicinity.⁸⁸ However, there was insufficient

⁸¹ PRO 541/55, Press Statement by Public Relations Office on the Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire Relief Fund Committee, 3 Oct 1955.

⁸² PRO 541/55, Letter from Director, SWD, to George Thomson, PRO, 3 Oct 1955.

⁸³ PRO 541/55, Press Statement by Public Relations Office on the Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire Relief Fund Committee, 3 Oct 1955.

⁸⁴ CO 1030/269, Social Welfare Monthly Report, Oct 1955, p. 1; and Nov 1955, p. 1. The SJRO paid a further \$20 per person to the fire victims.

⁸⁵ CO 1030/269, Social Welfare Monthly Report, Sep 1955, p. 7.

⁸⁶ PRO 542/55, Minutes of Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire Relief Fund Meeting, 25 Oct 1955.

⁸⁷ The emergency housing was envisaged to be built near existing rural centres of population such as Sembawang, Changi and Bukit Timah. HB 477/53, Memo from Chairman, SIT, to PS, MLGLH, 6 Aug 1955.

⁸⁸ SIT 813/55, Memo from Estates Officer (Admin), SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 15 Nov 1955.

SIT housing to meet this level of demand within the next few years.⁸⁹ In November 1955, some of the homeless fire victims, through the Blue Cross, asked the Trust to permit two families to share a house, which would reduce the monthly rental to an affordable \$25 or \$30.⁹⁰ The SIT agreed to consider such applications for Queenstown New Town, where the rental was \$50, but cautioned that such accommodation was not likely to become available soon.⁹¹ Earlier, on 3 November, the Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing had decided that the fire victims 'be permitted to rebuild accommodation themselves within the fire area' and had asked the Relief Fund Committee to 'give them every possible assistance in this matter'.⁹² The SIT later stated that it had, since the war, attempted to build 'housing of good and permanent quality', and in reference to 1-room dwellings, 'none would suggest that it is desirable for a family of six or seven to live in less than two rooms'.⁹³

The government's financially conservative, hands-off policy aroused much displeasure within the Chinese community. In 1956, when three kampong fires occurred, the *Nanyang Siang Pau* strongly urged the SIT to build more low-cost housing for the fire victims.⁹⁴ But SIT planners maintained an ambivalent attitude at best towards low-cost housing, which at different times reflected distrust, inertia and a confused assessment of the costs of the actual housing. In 1956, the Trust stated that building standards should be reduced no further and that in some cases had to be raised as maintenance costs had been found to increase for its low-rental housing.⁹⁵ In mid-1957, however, the authorities held that while 1-room flats should not be part of the SIT's general housing policy, they could be built at Old Kallang Airport, Tiong Bahru cemetery and Covent Garden to accommodate families affected by clearance policies; families who could not afford rentals for permanent housing and who were unable to afford more than \$20 monthly rentals.⁹⁶ In addition, the SIT felt

⁸⁹ SIT 813/55, Memo from Estates Officer (Admin), SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 9 Nov 1955.

⁹⁰ SIT 813/55, Memo from PS, MLGLH, to Manger, SIT, 23 Nov 1955; and Letter from President, Blue Cross Charitable Institution, to Director, SWD, 8 Nov 1955.

⁹¹ SIT 813/55, Memo from Estates Manager, SIT, to PS, MLGLH, 28 Nov 1955.

⁹² SIT 813/55, Letter from PS, MLGLH, to Chairman, Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire Relief Fund Committee, 3 Nov 1955.

⁹³ SIT, *Annual Report 1955*, p. 9.

⁹⁴ *NYSP*, 19 Jul 1956.

⁹⁵ SIT, *Annual Report 1956*, pp. 16, 19.

⁹⁶ HB 1095/49 Vol. II, Memo from PS, MLGLH, to Chairman, SIT, 31 May 1957.

that 5-storey blocks of 1-room flats, without lifts installed, could be constructed quickly and would be economical at a cost of \$2,950 per flat. While it recognised the potential dangers of overcrowding and slum conditions, the Trust believed 1-room flats to be more suitable for families of not more than six members in the Central Area,⁹⁷ as opposed to suburban areas, where schools could also be more economically built for the children of larger families.⁹⁸

'Happy to return to their former neighbourhood', Kampong Koo Chye, 1958

Following the Kampong Koo Chye fire of 5 April 1958, the SWD housed about 1,500 out of the 2,050 fire victims who could not find accommodation with relatives or friends at the Geylang English School for three weeks.⁹⁹ The government contributed to the relief fund for the fire victims on a dollar for dollar basis, and Mayor Ong Eng Guan announced a donation of \$100,000 from the Municipal Fund. The British Red Cross, St. John's Ambulance and other voluntary associations looked after the fire victims at the relief centre, while the City Council's nurses cared for the children.¹⁰⁰ The SWD and public organisations such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, SJRO, *Nanyang Siang Pau*, Singapore Buddhist Association, and the Rubber Packers Association raised more than \$160,000 and paid out \$82 to each fire victim. Trishaw-riders contributed their day's earnings to the fund, while the Singapore Attap Dwellers' Association donated milk, green peas and money.¹⁰¹

The Koo Chye inferno was important because it was the first major fire to be politicised. Despite pledges of unity in the relief work from the political parties, the right to administer relief on behalf of the fire victims was deeply contested. On 8 April 1958, the SWD instituted a ban on the presence of political parties at the relief centre. W. S. Woon, its Director, who had observed political party workers distributing gifts to fire victims, declared, 'We do not want to allow a tragedy to be

⁹⁷ HB 1095/49 Vol. II, Memo from Chairman, SIT, to PS, MLGLH, 12 Jun 1957.

⁹⁸ HB 1095/49 Vol. II, Memo titled 'Slum Clearance and Redevelopment' by Acting Manager, SIT, 16 Jul 1957.

⁹⁹ ST, 23 Apr 1958. By the third week of April, the numbers had halved to 820.

¹⁰⁰ CO 1030/673, Social Welfare Quarterly Report, Apr to Jun 1958, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰¹ SS, 10 Apr 1958.

exploited for political propaganda purposes'. He elaborated how the 'PAP had sent hundreds of young supporters to markets and stalls to collect vegetables and meat. By noon, they had gathered lorry loads of vegetables and meat – enough to meet the victims' requirements for weeks', although there was no fridge at the relief centre. The Workers' Party, he said, had also established collection centres at the fire site, decorated with party symbols and banners, while the Labour Front had turned its headquarters at De Souza Street into a fire relief collection centre.¹⁰² Meanwhile, in the PAP-controlled City Council, Mayor Ong Eng Guan voiced the authority of his office and party, lecturing the fire victims at the relief centre to 'clean up the shambles', since '[y]our place is filthy. Today 19 babies were sick because of insanitation. The people of Singapore have helped you. Now you must show them that you are willing to help yourselves'. The fire victims obeyed the popular Mayor.¹⁰³

The politicisation of the relief operation stemmed from the shift in the political climate. Singapore had taken a step towards self-government in 1955, when the Labour Front had been elected as a minority government under the Rendel Constitution, albeit on limited suffrage, with partial control over the island's domestic affairs, including housing. The more radical PAP, though numerically a small opposition in the Legislative Assembly, held sway in the City Council following the 1957 elections. Within a year of the Koo Chye fire, in May 1959, the political parties would contest the general elections in the hope of presiding over a self-governing state. It was in such a context of significantly raised political stakes that the relief and rehousing operations for the Koo Chye fire, and the subsequent inferno in Kampong Tiong Bahru, were formulated and subsequently contested.

The SWD also found itself embroiled in public controversy. On 21 April, W. S. Woon announced in a press statement that the relief centre would be closed to enable the school to commence term on 5 May. He assured the public that the Department had convinced the fire victims that they would not be forgotten once they left the relief centre.¹⁰⁴ On the same day, the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* had carried the

¹⁰² *ST*, 8 Apr 1958.

¹⁰³ *SS*, 10 Apr 1958.

¹⁰⁴ *SS*, 21 Apr 1958.

headline, 'The Social Welfare Department told the fire victims to leave the temporary relief centre'.¹⁰⁵ The SWD's relations with the Chinese press and the fire victims quickly degenerated. Woon alleged that some fire victims were enjoying themselves, passing the time of day drinking beer and stout. He also released the names of imposters, who were relatives of the fire victims and had collected relief payments, to the police.¹⁰⁶

There was considerable drama at the relief centre on the final day. The pro-establishment *Straits Times*, carrying the header 'High-living agitators fan stay-put revolt', reported that 'a group of Kampong Koo Chye bachelors who lived in style at the expense of the Singapore Government at the Geylang Methodist English School, turned "agitators" yesterday'. It claimed that while 99% of the families at the centre agreed to move out, the remaining 17 families refused to leave. SWD officials, who had organised the move, stated that the recalcitrant families had been encouraged by the bachelors having 'a fine time living at the school'. The families held out at the centre for about two hours, repeatedly rejecting offers of new housing at Kallang and Queenstown. They finally left at 8 pm, realising that they had no other choice but to accept the Department's offer.¹⁰⁷ On the following day, W. S. Woon claimed that the relief centre had been 'the best run so far'.¹⁰⁸ The government formally closed the centre at the end of the month and provided temporary accommodation for 244 families (1,432 persons) in newly-completed SIT flats at Kallang Estate and Queenstown New Town without initial payment of rent (\$40 monthly) and other charges, with only four families registered for Trust housing rejecting the offer.¹⁰⁹ The authorities also implemented a new Rent Subsidy Scheme to assist fire victim families unable to pay the full rentals.¹¹⁰ According to the *Singapore Free Press*, the rehoused families were 'happy in [the] new SIT homes'.¹¹¹

Differences of opinion on the separate question of permanently housing fire victims came sharply to the fore, testament to the growing importance of urban

¹⁰⁵ *SCJP*, 21 Apr 1958.

¹⁰⁶ *SFP*, 15 Apr 1958.

¹⁰⁷ *ST*, 1 May 1958.

¹⁰⁸ *SS*, 2 May 1958.

¹⁰⁹ SWD 69/58 Vol. I, Memo from Superintendent, Settlements, to Director, SWD, 28 Apr 1958.

¹¹⁰ CO 1030/673, Social Welfare Quarterly Report, Jul to Sep 1958, pp. 1-2.

¹¹¹ *SFP*, 7 May 1958.

kampong fires in national politics. Some, such as Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock in his radio broadcast of 6 April 1958, felt that the fire provided a singular opportunity to remake Singapore:

In these congested areas of wooden houses which are a symbol of the old Singapore, which we are striving to replace, fire, although accidentally begun, spreads quickly and destructively, and creates havoc before it can be brought under control....And this will give us all a new urgency in facing our problem of building houses in areas which are less vulnerable to fire, and meanwhile we will study what measures can be taken to reduce fire risks in the present areas of congested wooden houses.¹¹²

The Chief Fire Officer, J. Angus, concurred, 'This fire again illustrates what we must expect in congested, attap-roofed and wooden-built kampongs like Koo Chye'.¹¹³ The *Straits Times*, too, argued for the densest kampongs to be progressively cleared and underlined the need to brush aside 'opposition from squatters and from politicians out for cheap popularity'.¹¹⁴ Mak Pak Shee, SADA President and Assemblymen for Geylang, who had defended wooden housing following the 1953 Aljunied Road fire, now admitted that they were 'veritable death traps' and called upon the government to build properly zoned 'quarter-brick' housing with asbestos or zinc roofs for kampong dwellers.¹¹⁵

Other sections of society, however, held rather different views and still believed that the kampongs could be maintained. The fire spurred kampong dwellers in the Geylang Lorongs to establish fire-fighting squads; in January 1960, kampong dwellers at Lorong 23 established a squad, followed by a 45-man squad formed in November in a settlement of 30,000 at Lorong 33. With contributions from the residents, a small fire station was also built in Lorong 33, with the government supplying the fire-fighting equipment.¹¹⁶ Soon Eng Boh, the community leader who

¹¹² Radio Malaya broadcast, 6 Apr 1958.

¹¹³ *ST*, 7 Apr 1958.

¹¹⁴ *ST*, 8 Apr 1958.

¹¹⁵ *SS*, 15 Apr 1958.

¹¹⁶ *SFP*, 28 Nov 1960.

was consulted on the matter, felt that by simply sacrificing some time and money to buy basic equipment, the fire-fighting squad was a well-organised form of protection for one's houses and property.¹¹⁷ On 14 April, the *Singapore Standard*, owned by the Chinese tycoon Aw Boon Haw, warned of 'attap death traps' and worse tragedies than Kampong Koo Chye. But the article concluded that the solution lay in making the urban kampongs safe from fire rather than removing them altogether from the cityscape:

The answer is to redevelop attap areas. The way was shown by the Singapore Government about 5 years ago when it launched its resettlement project in Upper Aljunied Road.....Government carved up the land into housing plots, laid in light, water and sanitary services and then invited the attap dwellers to build whatever type of attap housing they could afford. In this way, houses were well spaced out, the area kept sanitary and the people generally were more comfortable and happier.

This plan may be emulated elsewhere, though with some modifications. It may entail the shifting of a few houses in each kampong to make way for proper roads and drains and to keep the homes a safe distance from each other. It will cost a lot of money but if the project is spread over several years the annual cost should not be too burdensome to the taxpayer.¹¹⁸

The official view, however, emerged victorious. The greatest significance of the fire was that part of the donations raised were used to finance the Kampong Koo Chye Fire Housing Scheme, a project which the SWD hailed as 'the first of its type' for fire victims.¹¹⁹ The project was organised by the government, which also provided special interest-free loans to the SIT.¹²⁰ Chief Minister Lim Yew Hock, after visiting the fire site, had promised that the government would give the fire

¹¹⁷ OHC, interview with Soon Eng Boh, 15 Apr 1982.

¹¹⁸ SS, 14 April 1958.

¹¹⁹ SWD, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 2.

¹²⁰ HB 295/58, Minutes of Board Meeting, 4 Apr 1960.

victims priority in obtaining Trust flats.¹²¹ Lim and Ong Eng Guan, after conferring, proposed the formation of a Committee of Trustees for the Kampong Koo Chye Fire Fund to help the SWD distribute relief for the fire victims, and if low-cost houses were to be built for them, decide how the houses would be allocated.¹²² Plans for building of emergency housing for the fire victims were drawn up within a few days of the fire.¹²³ On 17 April, the City Council Architect submitted the preliminary plans to the government, while on the same day, approval was sought from the Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing for the SIT to construct the houses and for the Commissioner of Lands to acquire the fire site.¹²⁴ In a landmark decision, the Trust, acting on behalf of the government, purchased seven acres of the fire site under the Land Acquisition Ordinance from owners Lee Kong Chian and Lee Yoke Sang.

While the establishment had decided in favour of building emergency housing on the fire site, it was unsure about the height of the dwellings. The original plan envisaged single-storey emergency housing, similar to that built at Kolam Ayer after the 1953 fires. The authorities were aware that such housing would be the quickest to build but would not provide sufficient units for all the fire victims, while the communal facilities could potentially cause friction among the residents; multi-storey housing, on the other hand, would be cheaper but would take longer to complete and would be less popular.¹²⁵ The SIT stated that single-storey housing had ‘more or less been abandoned’ because it did not provide adequate accommodation.¹²⁶ On 16 April, the Building Committee asked the SIT to draw up plans for ‘as many two-storey units as possible on the site with statutory access’.¹²⁷

The houses were also to be sold to the fire victims. Initially, the SIT had been hesitant to do this since rapid reconstruction was of the greatest essence:

¹²¹ SS, 8 Apr 1958.

¹²² SWD 69/58 Vol. I, Memo from PS, MLW, to Minister, Labour & Welfare, 12 Apr 1958.

¹²³ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1958*, 30 Apr 1958, p. 356.

¹²⁴ SWD 69/58 Vol. I, Memo from PS, MLW, to Minister, Labour & Welfare, 17 Apr 1958.

¹²⁵ HB 295/58, Minutes of Meeting on Kampong Koo Chye Rehousing, 16 May 1958.

¹²⁶ HB 295/58, Memo by Chief Architect, SIT, to Acting Manager, SIT, and Chairman, SIT, 20 May 1958.

¹²⁷ HB 295/58, Minutes of Building Committee Meeting, 16 Apr 1959.

[I]f, as was understood, it was the intention to build substandard or emergency type housing, then these should be rented in order that proper maintenance and management could be carried out. If it was intended that the houses should ultimately be sold, then the layout should from the beginning provide for proper legal access, plot size etc. in accordance with planning requirements. This would greatly reduce the number of units which the site could accommodate.¹²⁸

Moreover, not all the fire victims were willing or able to buy the SIT houses. It was originally noted that close to 1,000 persons would not want to purchase the new houses but would prefer cash relief.¹²⁹ The building scheme did not take off until the government realised that press reports had been ‘misleading’ the fire victims over the terms of the rehousing, and that it had first to provide a clear idea of the rebuilding programme before the victims could decide on returning to Kampong Koo Chye.¹³⁰

These questions on the terms of the rehousing slowed the project. On 18 March 1959, after a long delay, the Legislative Assembly instructed the SIT to construct 192 2-storey, 3-room terrace houses and 28 shops for sale to the fire victims.¹³¹ Each house had a living room and kitchen on the ground floor and two bedrooms on the first floor, similar to the nearby SIT flats at Lorong 3. There was some concern expressed over the housing design; Lim Koon Teck, Progressive Party Assemblyman for Paya Lebar, claimed that some families preferred a two-storey house accommodating two families, each occupying one level.¹³² The actual living space in the house, at 461.88 square feet, was below municipal bylaw standards.¹³³ Some Trust officials worried that ‘dangerous precedents may well be created if basic standards are lowered to extreme limits to accommodate this project’.¹³⁴

¹²⁸ HB 295/58, Memo by Acting Manager, SIT, to Lands Manager, SIT, 20 Mar 1959.

¹²⁹ *SLAD*, 18 Mar 1959, p. 2229.

¹³⁰ HB 295/58, Minutes of Meeting on Kampong Koo Chye Rehousing, 16 May 1958.

¹³¹ *SLAD*, 18 Mar 1959, p. 2229.

¹³² *SLAD*, 18 Mar 1959, p. 2233.

¹³³ HB 295/58, Memo by Acting Manager, SIT, to Chairman, SIT, 6 May 1959.

¹³⁴ HB 67/59, Memo from Lands Manager, SIT, to Acting Manager, SIT, 1 Jun 1959.

Consequently, despite a strong start to the rehousing programme, it was not until the end of 1960, more than one and a half years after the fire, that the victims obtained their new homes. On 29 June 1959, at a meeting with the heads of fire victim households, it was agreed that the cost of the houses be subsidised by donations collected from the public, government and City Council, totalling \$298,000. The sale prices of the dwellings and shops were set at \$4,940 and \$6,339 respectively. Of the 329 families affected by the fire, 196 families (1,237 persons), some of which had as many as thirty persons,¹³⁵ had applied for the new houses. The scheme was completed in 1960, reportedly one and a half months 'ahead of schedule' by the Housing and Development Board (established in February that year), although the fire had occurred in April 1958. Those who could not purchase the houses comprised the unemployed and indigent and those in financial difficulty, all of whom preferred cash payments.¹³⁶ What was historically significant was, as in the PAP leadership's case in 1961, the Labour Front government's determination to ensure that no fire victim requiring a house was left out of the scheme.¹³⁷ The applicants, who were allocated their units by public ballot on 26 November, received the keys to their houses on 30 December. They paid a 'low deposit' of \$350 and would service the balance of the payment in interest-free monthly installments over 15 years. They were reportedly 'happy to return to their former neighbourhood'.¹³⁸

The Koo Chye fire rehousing scheme marked a major turning point in the official policy on emergency housing. In a crucial report in 1958, the Planning Coordination Committee,¹³⁹ formed in 1951 to advise the government on the development of land, had conceded that experiments in emergency housing at Kolam Ayer had not been financially successful. However, the committee, citing the inadequate number of permanent housing built, urged that 'the possibility of evolving an economic type of semi-permanent housing estates with the advantages of speedy, low-cost construction must not be denied and experiments must continue'.

¹³⁵ HB 295/4/58, Minutes of Meeting, 25 Jun 1960.

¹³⁶ SWD 36/59, Kampong Koo Chye Fire Victims: Appeals for Payment from Those who have Registered to Purchase SIT Houses, undated, c. 1958.

¹³⁷ HB 295/4/58, Minutes of Meeting, 25 Jun 1960.

¹³⁸ HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 25.

¹³⁹ The committee comprised the Trust's Chairman, Manager, Senior Planner (Replanning), Senior Planner (Development Control), Administrative Officer (Planning), Estates Manager, Planning Adviser, and Acting Chief Architect.



Plate 5.2: The Kampong Koo Chye Fire Rehousing Scheme. Source: HDB, *Annual Report 1960*.

The committee proposed a supplementary programme of emergency housing. But it admitted great reluctance in reaching this conclusion due to the higher standards of housing normally built by the Trust, and that the envisaged emergency housing would only be ‘as good as the limits of finance and the needs of the situation permit’. The committee carefully weighed the merits of multi-storey and lower (1- and 2-storey) emergency housing. Inexpensive five-storey blocks, which would not have lifts installed and have communal cooking and sanitary facilities, would still be costly to maintain and supervise. The greatest problem, however, would be to persuade people to take up such housing and pay rent for them, since it ‘assumes the movement of tenants to new areas – generally from the City centre to the suburbs’, where ‘[t]enants are asked to uproot themselves from their present communities and to move in amongst strangers and, in addition, to increase their distances from places of work and to incur additional transport costs’.¹⁴⁰ It was considered feasible, however, to move low-income families into emergency housing for a temporary period before relocating them in permanent housing.¹⁴¹ The committee prepared a list of sites for the construction of emergency housing (see Table 5.1), including Tiong Bahru cemetery, marked as ‘available’ for housing development.

¹⁴⁰ HB 477/53, Report titled ‘Housing’ by the Planning Coordination Committee, undated, c. 1959.

¹⁴¹ HB 477/53, Supplementary report to report titled ‘Housing’ by the Planning Coordination Committee, undated, c. 1959.

Table 5.1: Possible Housing Sites for Emergency Housing, 1958

Site	Gross Residential Acreage	Availability of Utility Services	Other Remarks
St. Michael's Road	54	Within a few months	--
Queenstown Neighbourhood 3	90	Available 1960-61	--
Queenstown Neighbourhood 4	116	Available 1960	--
Queenstown Neighbourhood 5	50	Available 1959	--
Thomson Road	48	No main sewers Other services 1961-62	Squatter clearance
Kallang Airport	84	Available	Includes area now being developed
Bukit Timah Village	5	No main sewers Electricity, water available	Site preparation will be lengthy Squatter clearance
Tiong Bahru Cemetery	15	Available	Site preparation 1961-1962 Clearance of graves
Tanjong Rhu	20	Available	--
MacPherson Road West	20	Available 1960	Squatter clearance
MacPherson Road East	56	Available 1960	Squatter clearance
Toa Payoh	587	Services available on completion of site preparation, 1961-64	Substantial squatter clearance
Bukit Theresa	27	--	Squatter and graves clearance
Rifle Range Road	12	--	Squatter clearance
Malay Settlement	60	--	--
Ulu Pandan	50	--	Squatter clearance
Woodlands	900	Sewerage depends on completion of City Council Ulu Pandan site and construction of main trunk. Electricity and water available.	Little squatter clearance Further areas being acquired

Source: HB 477/53, Supplementary report to report titled 'Housing' by the Planning Coordination Committee, undated, c. 1959.

In early 1959, the SIT found itself with increasingly diminished funds for housing – the British colonial authorities had allocated only \$2 million for new projects, partly because it did not want to tie the hands of the newly-elected government by embarking on too many new public projects.¹⁴² Private housing developers were at the same time undercapitalised and catering to the higher income

¹⁴² *SLAD*, 18 Dec 1958, p. 1580.

group, while the ‘tolerated’ urban kampongs continued to proliferate beyond official control. Added to these problems was mounting political pressure as the general elections drew closer. Through the last quarter of 1958, the Trust was roundly criticised by various members of the Legislative Assembly for failing to adequately resolve the housing shortage and, in particular, for building housing beyond the financial reach of the low-income population.¹⁴³ In explaining the limited housing budget to the Assembly in December 1958, the Financial Secretary T. M. Hart was compelled to state, ‘I have felt for some time that we should explore the one-room flatlet concept more thoroughly than we have done’.¹⁴⁴ Finally, the Trust was persuaded to seek economies of scale by reviewing building standards to permit multi-storey emergency housing.¹⁴⁵ In January 1959, SIT and Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing officials proposed a revised building plan comprising permanent housing and a combination of single- and multi-storey emergency housing.¹⁴⁶ The 1959 provisional building programme, drawn up in the first quarter of the year, envisaged the construction of emergency housing at MacPherson Road (South) resettlement area, where conditions had deteriorated and where a pilot scheme of 1-storey emergency housing was proposed.¹⁴⁷ Similar emergency housing was also planned at Selegie Road,¹⁴⁸ and Tiong Bahru cemetery.

‘The opportunity to clean up the area must not be lost’, Kampong Tiong Bahru, 1959

The second Kampong Tiong Bahru fire on 13 February 1959 had rendered 5,220 persons homeless. The Singapore Council of Social Service (SCSS), established in December 1958 to coordinate relief work in civil disasters, collected donations for the Kampong Tiong Bahru Relief Fund totalling \$600,000 and paid out \$141 to each fire victim through the SWD.¹⁴⁹ The amounts distributed represent

¹⁴³ SLAD, 10 Sep 1958, pp. 725-62; and 18 Dec 1958, pp. 1556-98.

¹⁴⁴ SLAD, 18 Dec 1958, p. 1581.

¹⁴⁵ HB 477/53, Report titled ‘Considerations in Respect of Low-Cost Housing and Unauthorised Housing’, 7 Jan 1959.

¹⁴⁶ HB 16/59, Notes of a Meeting of Officers to Consider Housing Policy, 16 January 1959.

¹⁴⁷ HB 16/59, Memo by Acting Manager, SIT, 4 Feb 1959.

¹⁴⁸ HB 16/59, Provisional Building Programme, 1959/60, 6 Apr 1959.

¹⁴⁹ HB 25/59 Vol. II, Notes of a Discussion at the Ministry of National Development, 9 Sep 1960; CO 1030/673, Social Welfare Quarterly Report, Jan to Mar 1958, pp. 1-2.

a continuous increase in relief payments compared to previous fires, indicating both a greater ability of the authorities to organise relief work and a more enthusiastic response from the public and voluntary organisations. Company officials of the Singapore Glass Manufacturers located at nearby Henderson, which employed many of the fire victims, in making the donation explained, ‘We are part of the area, and we feel that we should do something to help the people’.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Kai Kok Old Boys’ Association in Bukit Ho Swee collected \$22,000.¹⁵¹ The Federation of Malaya also sent a cheque for \$50,000. Lim Yew Hock, in expressing his gratitude for the donation, stated that this was ‘another proof of the close ties which exist between the people and the Governments of the two territories’.¹⁵² The SWD converted four schools at Kim Seng Road into a relief centre. There, working with the SIT, SCSS, Public Works Department, Health Department, Rural Board, Armed Services, and the voluntary organisations, the SWD housed and fed about 2,500 people who could not find accommodation with relatives and friends. Compared to the drawn-out Koo Chye relief saga, the centre was closed within just thirteen days. By 17 February, all but 75 families had registered for SIT housing.¹⁵³

Following a special meeting that day, the SIT carried out ‘Operation Shift’ on the 20th, temporarily moving 854 fire victim families to 784 flats (496 units of 2-room and 288 units of 1-room dwellings) at Kallang Estate under Temporary Occupation Licences in the eastern part of the City. The estate, commenced in 1957, had by 1959 3,004 units of 1-, 2- and 3-room dwellings ‘built to the most economical standards possible’ and shops. Kallang Estate had initially been built with the clearance of the overcrowded shophouses in the Central Area,¹⁵⁴ and contained ‘experimental’ 1-room dwellings which were allegedly both low-cost and low-maintenance.¹⁵⁵ The fire victims received initial rent and public utilities waivers for three months but this concession was later extended for a further month by the government in view of the general elections in May (after which the fire victims paid subsidised rates). Priority rehousing was given to the bigger households, families staying at the Kim Seng relief centre, with larger families of seven persons

¹⁵⁰ *ST*, 14 Feb 1959.

¹⁵¹ *ST*, 25 Feb 1959.

¹⁵² *SS*, 17 Feb 1959.

¹⁵³ HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo from Estates Manager, SIT, to Acting Manager, SIT, 28 Feb 1959.

¹⁵⁴ *SIT, Annual Report 1957*, p. 11.

¹⁵⁵ *SIT, Annual Report 1958*, p. 45.

or more allocated 2-room flats and the rest provided 1-room flats.¹⁵⁶ However, the considerable distance to Kallang underlined the SIT's failure to clear the unauthorised wooden housing in the Tiong Bahru locality even three and a half years after the 1955 fire. Those able to find lodging with relatives and friends were reportedly a small minority,¹⁵⁷ but some 162 families still preferred to find their own accommodation.

As in the case of the Koo Chye fire, there was widespread discontent with the relief work. Some of the fire victims, encountering a radically different home environment after the disaster, were pleased with the modern sanitation and facilities at Kallang.¹⁵⁸ But many families were enraged and disappointed, upon realising that the '2-room' flats had only a bedroom and a living room and '1-room' flats were simply a hall. The 'misunderstanding' was a result of the official practice of labelling the hall as a room, rather than confining the term to a proper room. The fire victims were also unhappy with the lack of privacy in the smaller flats, with some claiming to have to sleep with the doors and windows shut to avoid embarrassment. Similarly, a couple, sharing the flat with the man's brother and grandmother, complained, 'There is no privacy, no place to eat and not enough money'. Other grievances included living on the upper floors (which reduced water pressure in the taps and forced the women to collect water from neighbours on the ground floor),¹⁵⁹ the lifts not stopping on the 3rd and 4th floors, the distance from the schools, and the inability to rear poultry to supplement one's income. When the rent-free period expired, 265 of the original 854 families moved out of the estate, mostly to return to the wooden houses in or near Kampong Tiong Bahru.¹⁶⁰

In particular, extended families, which had lived together in large wooden houses in the kampong, discovered to their horror that their flats were too small. Madam Seah Guay Nee, 63, and her two sons, two daughters-in-law and ten grandchildren, were shocked to discover only one bedroom in their flat. Seah demanded to be allocated two flats:

¹⁵⁶ HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo from Estates Manager, SIT, to Acting Manager, SIT, 28 Feb 1959.

¹⁵⁷ *SCJP*, 14 Feb 1959.

¹⁵⁸ *SS*, 23 Feb 1959.

¹⁵⁹ *SS*, 23 Feb 1959.

¹⁶⁰ HB 25/59 Vol. II, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 19 Apr 1961.

I have two grown-up sons and 2 daughters-in-law, and 10 grandchildren. How can we all stay together? There is only 1 room for all of us. The SIT should provide us with another flat – if possible, next door.¹⁶¹

In late March, four large families were finally given 2-room and 3-room accommodation.¹⁶² The difficulty of the extended families obtaining flats of suitable sizes demonstrates the fact that the colonial government did not merely view SIT housing as a superior form of accommodation to replace wooden housing. Trust flats were targeted primarily at nuclear families, possibly with grandparents or a relative living with them, which was the desired basic social unit of modern Singapore. Consequently, by moving nuclear or semi-extended kampong families into public housing, the official housing programme aimed to integrate them into the social structure of a high-modernist nation-state.

Far more so than the Koo Chye fire, the Tiong Bahru disaster, having occurred closer to the time of the general elections, produced a series of remarkable scenes of one-upmanship among the politicians. In the City Council meeting on 3 March, Ong Eng Guan, matching the Council's previous contribution for the Koo Chye fire, sought a \$100,000 donation for the fire victims. Lee Bah Chee, Liberal Socialist Councillor for Tiong Bahru, countered with a \$150,000 vote, with the rationale that more people were affected this time. Ong, however, rejected the higher amount, citing financial stringency and arguing that it was the government's duty, not the Council's, to provide relief. He told Lee that he would oppose any attempt to make political capital out of the fire by raising the amount of the donation. Lee replied, somewhat wildly, that since Ong had been Mayor, there had been two serious fires and that if he had the people's interests at heart, he would return to his hometown in Batu Pahat! Ong pointed out that while Lee had worked hard on behalf of the Tiong Bahru fire victims, he had not done so in the case of the Koo Chye fire. The mayor's motion was carried.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ *ST*, 21 Feb 1959.

¹⁶² HB 25/59 Vol. I, Minutes of Estate Committee Meeting, 20 Mar 1959.

¹⁶³ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1959*, 3 Mar 1959, p. 18.

On the same day in early March, Tang Peng Yeu, Labour Front Councillor for Queenstown, proposed to provide street lights, sewerage and fire hydrants in Kampong Tiong Bahru, while S. M. Vasagar, Liberal Socialist Councillor for Sepoy Lines, asked that immediate measures be taken to establish fire hydrants and enlarge the water mains in all kampongs. According to Labour Front Councillor Ho Kok Hoe, the opposition charged the PAP with delaying the provision of an adequate water supply to the kampong because of party politics, Tiong Bahru being the ward of a rival party.¹⁶⁴ Liberal Socialist Lee Bah Chee bluntly blamed the fire on the PAP:

I knew this would happen. One of my first moves when I was elected to the City Council was to ask for fire hydrants to be installed INSIDE the kampong. The PAP said the Council had no money and could not accede to my request. If they had, the firemen would not have been hampered in their work and many hundreds of people would not have lost their homes. The PAP must accept the blame. If they had only thought of the welfare of these poor people, millions of dollars would not have gone up in smoke.¹⁶⁵

On 31 March, the Fire Brigade agreed to increase the number of fire hydrants in Kampong Tiong Bahru from 12 to 14 and re-site two existing hydrants near more accessible mains, although the volume of water remained unchanged.¹⁶⁶ On the same day, the Council also heard that the Acting Chief Fire Officer and the Water Engineer had taken preliminary measures to examine the feasibility of installing additional hydrants in kampongs.¹⁶⁷ On 30 April, the Council adopted Tang's motion to provide sewerage to Kampong Tiong Bahru.¹⁶⁸

The Tiong Bahru disaster also ignited a fire of sorts in the Singapore Legislative Assembly, a sign that kampong blazes had attained a newfound political

¹⁶⁴ Author's interview with Ho Kok Hoe, 6 Feb 2007.

¹⁶⁵ SS, 14 Feb 1959.

¹⁶⁶ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1959*, 30 Apr 1959, pp. 22-23.

¹⁶⁷ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1959*, 30 Apr 1959, p. 23.

¹⁶⁸ CC, *Minutes of Proceedings 1959*, 30 Apr 1959, pp. 20-21.

importance at the highest level of politics. The *Sin Chew Jit Poh* reminded its readers that the disaster relief work on behalf of kampong dwellers constituted the 'first step' in the country's practice of self-government.¹⁶⁹ The relocation of the fire victims to Kallang became a point of conflict in the run-up to the elections on 30 May, as Polling Day, Saturday, was a public holiday. Previously, on 3 March, William Tan Ah Lek, Democratic Party Assemblyman for Tiong Bahru, had requested the government to either set up polling stations in Kallang or provide transport for the fire victims to vote in Tiong Bahru. Lee Kuan Yew, PAP Assemblyman for Tanjong Pagar, referring to the government's promise to build flats in Tiong Bahru within three months (by May), wondered if 'pleasure-loving and indolent Ministers are rehousing the fire victims in record time for reasons not unconnected with the elections'.¹⁷⁰ Lee also called Lim Yew Hock an 'amateur fire-fighter', whose photograph had appeared on the front page of the *Straits Times* the day after the fire, showing him at the fire site with his shirt sleeves and trousers rolled up and holding a bucket to douse attap roofs.¹⁷¹ Lim countered that he had never harboured a desire for publicity, 'unlike certain leaders of the PAP', and that on the day of the fire, 'there was a PAP propaganda machine out there saying that the Government was responsible for the fire!'¹⁷²

The following day, the politicians continued to engage in 'fire politicking' while claiming to deplore it. Having had Lee Kuan Yew imply that he was trying to win votes for the elections, William Tan moved a motion against the electioneering propaganda which took place at the fire site and blamed the PAP City Councillors for not installing bigger water pipes in the area. He also accused PAP relief workers at the fire site of asking university medical students who had come to help to put on party armbands, and of making political speeches claiming the PAP to be the only political party in Singapore which assisted the unfortunate.¹⁷³ The PAP, Tan continued, had also organised students of Kai Kok Public School and Chong Teck School to spread propaganda and set up a registration post in a coffeeshop, although

¹⁶⁹ *SCJP*, 14 Feb 1959.

¹⁷⁰ *SLAD*, 3 Mar 1959, pp. 2056-7.

¹⁷¹ *ST*, 14 Feb 1959. *The Singapore Standard*, on the other hand, carried a much smaller picture of Lim inside its report on the fire. *SS*, 14 Feb 1959.

¹⁷² *SLAD*, 3 Mar 1959, p. 2059.

¹⁷³ *SLAD*, 4 Mar 1959, pp. 2139-41.

the government had already established registration centres.¹⁷⁴ In response, Lee Kuan Yew wondered why, if the government was indeed against using acts of charity for publicity, a picture of Lim Yew Hock with his trousers rolled up and holding a bucket of water had appeared on the front page of the Singapore People's Alliance organ.¹⁷⁵ To Lee's accusation, Lee Choon Eng, Labour Front Assemblyman for Queenstown, who seconded Tan's motion, observed that Lee was not at the scene himself, while the Chief Minister held a hose to fight the flames, the PAP, including the Mayor of Singapore, had brought with them photographers.¹⁷⁶ Tan's motion was passed.

Most crucially, the fire set the government on a course of rehousing which eclipsed those efforts of previous fires. On 16 February, the SIT's Acting Chief Architect S. C. Woolmer and Planning Adviser D. H. Komlosy emphasised that the fire presented a valuable opportunity to implement the Master Plan's proposals:

This area is part of one of the worst attap slums in Singapore. The opportunity to clean up the area presented by the occurrence of the fire must not be lost. A snap decision, for instance, to replace the attap huts with single-storey dwellings without considering its impact on the surrounding areas might in the end only perpetuate the present slum conditions....

We consider that the redevelopment of the area should be carefully planned, in relation to the needs of the district as a whole. The area to be considered ultimately should be that bounded by Henderson Road to the west, Tiong Bahru Road in the north, the new ring road to the south, and Tiong Bahru [Estate] to the East. This composes an area of 160 acres, and at present houses 21,500 people.

The Master Plan proposes that ultimately within this area residential development should be provided for persons, that two sites for

¹⁷⁴ *SLAD*, 4 Mar 1959, pp. 2148-9.

¹⁷⁵ *SLAD*, 4 Mar 1959, p. 2145.

¹⁷⁶ *SLAD*, 4 Mar 1959, p. 2146.

schools should be provided, a shopping centre, community centre etc. It also provides for a main N.S. road which cuts through the fire site.

The redevelopment of the fire site should be considered in relation to these developments. We think that the fire area should be rounded off to include some of the surrounding attap slums, to form a Redevelopment Scheme. The fire site should be planned in relation to the *Scheme area*, and the first phase would be the fire site itself. The total area of the Scheme would be 69 acres, at present containing about 9,600 persons.¹⁷⁷

The fire site, Woolmer emphasised, ought to be used as the focal point to redevelop the entire kampong,

[I]t is strongly recommended that only a planned redevelopment of the site with permanent housing should be carried out, and that haphazard rebuilding with attap or timber barrack building should be strongly resisted and prevented....This kampong is one of the largest, most congested and most insanitary. It is very near to the heart of the city and is sandwiched between good quality public housing, on the one side at Tiong Bahru and Kampong Silat, and on the other at Redhill and Queenstown. The fire, tragic though it is for the victims, gives an opportunity to carry out clearance and redevelopment, not only of the fire area itself, but of a substantial portion of the rest of the existing slum....

The redevelopment of the fire area should be regarded as Phase I of the whole redevelopment referred to in the accompanying memorandum [by the Chief Architect and Planning Adviser] and decanting from other parts of the scheme area could be carried out, a) into the rebuilt fire area, b) into the transit camp at Queenstown Neighbourhood V, and c) into similar emergency development which

¹⁷⁷ HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo by Chief Architect, SIT, and Planning Adviser, SIT, 16 Feb 1959.

could be provided on the old cemetery site at Tiong Bahru behind Boon Tiong Road, if funds could be provided for development immediately....It will be noted that the redevelopment proposals provide for accommodating more occupants within the area than were there before, with a far higher standard of living, open space, community facilities etc.¹⁷⁸

Included in the SIT's long-range plan for Tiong Bahru was the building of single- and multi-storey permanent housing; the site was suitable for both such housing and, the Trust emphasised, 'should not be wasted on temporary structures'.¹⁷⁹

With the fire victims temporarily rehoused in Kallang, the fire had provided the government with a key strategic foothold in Tiong Bahru to commence its emergency housing project. On 17 February, Lim Yew Hock assured the fire victims that the government would acquire the fire site and build low-cost, prefabricated houses for them within three months.¹⁸⁰ On 3 March, Lim quoted the SIT almost verbatim in his speech to the Legislative Assembly: 'only a planned redevelopment of the site with permanent housing should be carried out and that haphazard rebuilding with attap or timber barrack buildings should be strongly resisted and prevented'.¹⁸¹ The *Singapore Standard* showed a photograph of a make-shift coffee shop, supposedly erected on the fire site 24 hours after the inferno, with its business in operation as usual.¹⁸² But Lim subsequently authorised the police to stop fire victims from putting up temporary structures. He assured the victims, 'This will be a real low cost housing scheme. We will try to have sufficient accommodation for all and the rent is going to be within the means of the people'. Already, '[l]ittle huts here have meantime mushroomed' at the fire site 'as soon as the ashes cooled off', to which fire victims were soon returning.¹⁸³

The Chinese community appeared to concur with the government on the kampong fire hazard; a *Nanyang Siang Pau* editorial on 15 February called for

¹⁷⁸ HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo titled 'Tiong Bahru Fire' by the Acting Manager, SIT, 16 Feb 1959.

¹⁷⁹ HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo titled 'Emergency Housing: Tiong Bahru Fire Victims', undated, c. 1959.

¹⁸⁰ SS, 18 Feb 1959.

¹⁸¹ SLAD, 3 Mar 1959, p. 1998.

¹⁸² SS, 18 Feb 1959.

¹⁸³ ST, 18 Feb 1959; NYSP, 20 Feb 1959; author's interview with Kwa Chong Guan, 6 Feb 2007.

wooden houses to become ‘historical relics’, urging the authorities to build proper housing for the fire victims and hold excess housing in reserve for wooden house dwellers cleared from the locality.¹⁸⁴ Most of the fire site was owned by nine private landowners with only a small portion belonging to the Crown. City Councillor Lee Bah Chee warned that the landowners would stand to profit if the government acquired the land.¹⁸⁵ The *Sin Chew Jit Poh* revealed that some of the landowners were holding out for high prices and urged that, since landowners in Singapore typically received little income from their land, they ‘should not go beyond what is proper and place an undue burden on the Treasury and society’.¹⁸⁶ The Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing declared that it would compel landowners seeking a higher price to sell their land at the value fixed under the Land Acquisition Ordinance, which empowered the government to compulsorily acquire land required for public development.¹⁸⁷ Under the Land Acquisition Ordinance, the government eventually purchased 37 acres of land belonging to the Hokkien Huay Kuan (of which only 13½ acres were the fire site) at a cost of \$711,000 and, equally significant, 16 acres of the disused Tiong Bahru cemetery (Ma Kau Thiong) for an estimated \$500,000.¹⁸⁸ As in the case of the Koo Chye fire, it provided interest-free loans to the SIT to build a combination of 2-storey terrace houses, 5-storey self-contained and communal flats, and 9-storey self-contained flats, totalling 1,015 units of flats and shops, at the fire site.¹⁸⁹

At the cemetery site, the Trust planned to erect a further 1,360 units, comprising 904 units of 1-room and smaller numbers of 2-room and 3-room flats, in multi-storey blocks of emergency housing with communal sanitary facilities following the exhumation of the 3,000-odd graves.¹⁹⁰ The cemetery, as noted in Chapter 3, had as early as October 1956 attracted official interest as a possible site for emergency housing. In January 1959, SIT and Ministry of Local Government, Lands and Housing officials had again recommended it as suitable for multi-storey

¹⁸⁴ *NYSP*, 15 Feb 1959.

¹⁸⁵ *SS*, 18 Feb 1959.

¹⁸⁶ *SCJP*, 20 Feb 1959.

¹⁸⁷ *SS*, 19 Feb 1959.

¹⁸⁸ HB 1045/53, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, 10 Aug 1960.

¹⁸⁹ HB 25/59 Vol. I, Minutes of Trust Meeting, 10 Mar 1959.

¹⁹⁰ HB 1001/52 Vol. III, Memo from Acting Manager, SIT, to Deputy Secretary, SIT, 6 Apr 1959.

emergency housing.¹⁹¹ Just days before the fire, on 4 February, the Trust observed that the hill had ‘very good loadbearing characteristics’, although ‘[s]ome clearance remains to be done’.¹⁹² Upon acquiring the cemetery site, the SIT Chief Architect urged that clearance proceed as fast as possible.¹⁹³ In October 1960, the HDB, now having taken over the SIT’s building schemes, echoed the Trust’s belief that, ‘with the completion of the one-room blocks in the Cemetery Site, clearance of the settlers in Covent Garden becomes possible’.¹⁹⁴ By then, as Plate 5.6 shows, the cemetery scheme was already underway.

Unlike the Koo Chye housing scheme, the Tiong Bahru units were for rent. Because the government wanted to build the maximum number of units possible in the shortest time and because the houses were intended simply as the spearhead of a larger project of kampong clearance and redevelopment, the accommodation was not built for sale.¹⁹⁵ A further 15.8 acres in Tiong Bahru were compulsorily acquired by the HDB in 1961, an area on which lived some 155 families, but the Board saw ‘no difficulty in undertaking expeditious clearance’.¹⁹⁶ The HDB readily concurred with its predecessor on the redevelopment of Tiong Bahru:

The Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire Site is part of a very extensive and unhealthy slum in the town area. The Board is preparing a plan for the gradual clearance of these slums and, with the cooperation of the squatters, it may be possible to achieve good results in slum clearance in the course of the next few years. The existing slum population will then be provided with housing in a more decent and healthy environment.¹⁹⁷

Lim Yew Hock had predicted that Phase I of the Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire Site Scheme (comprising the 2-storey, 3-room terrace houses) would be completed in three months, while the remaining two phases of multi-storey flats would be

¹⁹¹ HB 16/59, Notes of a Meeting of Officers to Consider Housing Policy, 16 January 1959.

¹⁹² HB 16/59, Memo by Acting Manager, SIT, 4 Feb 1959.

¹⁹³ HB 932/57, Memo from Acting Chief Architect, SIT, to Lands Manager, SIT, 25 Mar 1959.

¹⁹⁴ HB 1139/56, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Lands Manager, HDB, 15 Oct 1960.

¹⁹⁵ HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo from Acting Manager, SIT, to Chairman, SIT, 24 Mar 1959.

¹⁹⁶ HB 25/59 Vol. II, Memo from Lands Manager, SIT, to CEO, HDB, 27 Jan 1961.

¹⁹⁷ HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 35.

finished in six to eight week intervals thereafter, with the whole scheme to be completed in a year.¹⁹⁸ The building commenced on 6 March, but it proved more difficult than anticipated and took much longer to complete. The fire site was difficult to control, with its former dwellers trying to reclaim it. In mid-February, when two revolvers were recovered at the site, the police admitted, 'The site is too big and everything is in shambles'. The *Straits Times* had commented on the seemingly-lawless nature of the site:

Kampong Tiong Bahru was one of the island's biggest secret society hideouts and numerous gang wars have been fought there. The main triad society at the kampong was Group 18 (major gangs: Gi Kun Tong and Gi Ho), with Group 08 a close second. A Group 24 affiliate, Gang 969, also operated there. The *Straits Times* understands that the fire has not disrupted the secret society organisation although their members are scattered at the moment.¹⁹⁹

Building contractors were initially pressed for protection money and experienced 'organised terrorism' until the secret society members were removed from the site by the police. But they continued to suffer thefts of building material, fittings and electrical wiring, while '[e]very evening, between 5 pm to 6.30 pm, crowds of teenagers run all over the building site damaging the doors, windows, walls and fittings, and scratching the paintings with all sorts of drawings and slogans'.²⁰⁰ The clearance of the large number of graves, which required the government to award tenders for the exhumation, was also time-consuming. On 27 April 1959, the fire victims were warned of a three-week delay in construction due to the clearance.²⁰¹ But it was not until after the SIT exerted pressure on the Land Office that exhumation was actually completed.²⁰² Clearance of the living from the site was just as difficult, with the families residing there reluctant to leave. In October, the SIT reported a possible delay in Phase 1 of the Fire Site Scheme while

¹⁹⁸ *SLAD*, 3 Mar 1959, p. 1999; HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo from Chairman, SIT, to PS, MLGLH, 21 Apr 1959.

¹⁹⁹ *ST*, 18 Feb 1959.

²⁰⁰ HB 25/59 Vol. II, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Commissioner of Police, 24 Oct 1960.

²⁰¹ *ST*, 27 Apr 1959.

²⁰² SIT 100/48, Monthly Reports, Mar 1959, Apr 1959 and May 1959.

enforced eviction from the cemetery site might be necessary.²⁰³ Only two of the six families residing at Phase 1 of the Fire Site Scheme had accepted SIT accommodation by then,²⁰⁴ while at the cemetery site, notices to quit the cemetery were issued to 17 of the 59 affected families and court proceedings instituted against 16 others.²⁰⁵ But in May 1960, 22 families residing at the cemetery had yet to move out.²⁰⁶

The political fallout between Ong Eng Guan, the PAP Minister for National Development, and the rest of the party leadership in June 1960 further hindered the project. The PAP government established after the 1959 elections had instructed the SIT to ‘reduce the building cost and to produce the maximum number of housing units within the limits of available financial resources’, by using the most economical materials for walls and partitions, avoiding piling and using hard ground for building, reducing floor areas, and increasing the residential density.²⁰⁷ In August 1960, however, Toh Chin Chye, the Deputy Prime Minister, revealed that ‘our housing development programme has not got off to a fine start’. He declared that tenders for the first two phases of the Tiong Bahru Fire Site Scheme had been submitted to Ong Eng Guan in June 1959, but were repeatedly rejected and revised due to Ong’s ‘indecision and frequent changes of mind’; the contracts consequently were approved only in November 1959 and January 1960, a half-year delay.²⁰⁸ Ong in turn accused the PAP of freezing the funds allocated in 1959 by the Lim Yew Hock government for housing and in particular for the Kampong Koo Chye and Kampong Tiong Bahru fire site schemes.²⁰⁹ PAP Assemblyman Low Por Tuck countered that Goh Keng Swee, the Minister for Finance, had released the funds for the fire site schemes in 1959.²¹⁰ The SIT records show that in July that year, Ong, as SIT Chairman, had appointed Chan Choy Siong, PAP Assemblywoman for Delta, as his personal representative for the rehousing of the fire victims staying in Kallang,

²⁰³ HB 16/59, Memo from Manager, SIT, to Head, Building Department, SIT, 19 Oct 1959.

²⁰⁴ HB 16/59, Schedule titled ‘Land Availability and Clearance Position, 1959-1960’, 20 Oct 1959.

²⁰⁵ HB 932/57, Monthly Report of Clearance, Jun 1960.

²⁰⁶ HB 932/57, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 20 May 1960.

²⁰⁷ SIT, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 39.

²⁰⁸ *SLAD*, 9 Aug 1960, pp. 460-61.

²⁰⁹ *SLAD*, 4 Aug 1960, pp. 139-40.

²¹⁰ *SLAD*, 5 Aug 1960, pp. 256-57.

as ‘I am unable to devote much time to this work’.²¹¹ In August, however, he had approved the clearance priority for the fire site.²¹² The truth of the matter regarding Ong’s actions is difficult to establish. In September 1959, Ong, as Minister for National Development, had sought a \$415 million housing loan from the government to build over five years 84,000 1- and 2-room houses on 1,160 acres of government land for the lower-income group.²¹³ By that time, however, Lee Kuan Yew himself and his PAP colleagues had come to view Ong as lacking competence as a minister.²¹⁴ Ong’s ambitious pronouncements led the British Commissioner William Goode to wonder if Lee was indeed giving Ong ‘sufficient rope to hang himself’.²¹⁵

Of the 759 fire victim families staying in Kallang Estate in June 1959, 630 families wished to return to the fire site, while 80 families wanted to remain in Kallang, with a further 49 families undecided.²¹⁶ As Plate 5.5 shows, Phases I and II of 5-storey, 2-room self-contained flats and 1-room tenement flats of the Fire Site Scheme were completed by the HDB in 1960. The entire scheme of 1,015 flats was completed in early 1961, with families of five or less persons to be offered 1-room flats, and those of six persons or more 2-room flats or terrace houses, although the cemetery scheme was still under construction.²¹⁷ Priority was accorded to those living in Kallang, since ‘[m]any of these families have been making their living in and around Kampong Tiong Bahru area for years and at present they are still doing so’.²¹⁸ Similarly, most of the families not living in Kallang, the HDB observed, were residing in or near Kampong Tiong Bahru. The Board concluded that ‘these people

²¹¹ HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo from Ong Eng Guan, Minister for National Development, to Secretary, SIT, 30 Jul 1959. Ong was Chairman of the SIT from Jun 1959 to Jan 1960 when the Trust was abolished. Ong had built 794 units of housing in this period. *SLAD*, 12 Apr 1961, p. 1282.

²¹² HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo from Administrative Officer, Resettlement Department, to Commissioner of Lands, 21 Aug 1959.

²¹³ *ST*, 19 Sep 1959.

²¹⁴ FO 1091/104, Notes of Conversation between UK Commissioner and Lee Kuan Yew, 13 Nov 1959.

²¹⁵ RG 59, 746F.00/7-1659, Memo of Conversation between US Consul General and UK Commissioner, 16 Jul 1959; and 746F.00/7-959, Memo of Conversation between US Consul General and Ong Eng Guan, 9 Jul 1959.

²¹⁶ HB 25/59 Vol. I, Memo from Estates Manager, SIT, to Acting Manager, SIT, 8 Jun 1959.

²¹⁷ HB 25/59 Vol. II, Minutes of Board Meeting, 25 Jul 1960. The 1-room flats at the fire site were completed in January 1961.

²¹⁸ HB 25/59 Vol. II, Memo from Estates Officer, SIT, to Estates Manager, SIT, 30 May 1960.

have a very strong preference to remain in the area where they have been brought up or where they can more easily find their livelihood'.²¹⁹



Plate 5.3: The 3-room terrace houses of the Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire Site Phase I. Source: HDB, *Annual Report 1960*.



Plate 5.4: The 1-room emergency and 2-room flats of the Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire Site Phase II. Source: HDB, *Annual Report 1960*.

²¹⁹ HB 25/59 Vol. II, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 21 Oct 1960.



Plate 5.5: The completed SIT emergency housing of the Tiong Bahru Fire Site Scheme, October 1960. Royal Air Force, RAF Ref. No. 81/635, 1960 (Courtesy of Ministry of Defence).



Plate 5.6: Ongoing construction at the Tiong Bahru Cemetery Scheme (Ma Kau Thiong), October 1960. Note that earthworks are already visible. Royal Air Force, RAF Ref. No. 81/635, 1960 (Courtesy of Ministry of Defence).

But the fire victims' return to Tiong Bahru threw up a new set of problems. The high rentals, charged at full economic rates, and conservancy and service charges deterred many families: \$40 total for the 1-room flats, \$55 for 2-room flats and \$68 for the 3-room terrace houses. Eighty percent of the fire victims had a stated income which apparently could not pay a rental of more than \$25.²²⁰ When fixing the rental price, the Board had decided that

sufficient would appear to have been done for the fire victims in rehousing them over the last 2 years and since it has been decided that the scheme should now be a Housing Board scheme the completed units should be offered to the fire victims at the economic rents set out in my letter of 17 November 1960. To do otherwise would create a special group of favoured tenants of the Housing & Development Board at a time when the Board should make every effort to streamline its administration by laying down a policy for the equalisation of all rentals.²²¹

In April 1961, out of the 1,016 fire victim families, 452 families remained in Kallang Estate, paying the subsidised rentals of \$25 for 1-room flats, \$35 for 2-room flats and \$45, \$50 and \$55 for 3-room flats. By this time, 397 families were already living in their own accommodation (presumably near the fire site) and only 167 families accepted the Tiong Bahru flats. Of the 262 families which had moved out of Kallang and applied for the HDB flats, only 53 eventually accepted them. The low acceptance rate was ostensibly due to 'unfounded promises' made previously to the fire victims that they would be given cheap accommodation at the fire site.²²² The fire victims had been led to believe that the Tiong Bahru rentals would be lower than those at Kallang, at around \$17 per month for 1-room communal units and \$30 for 2-room flats.²²³ In December 1960, a delegation of 200 female fire victims had protested to Lim Kim San, Chairman of the HDB, over the high rentals to be charged at Tiong Bahru and urged him to fulfill the Board's alleged promise to let

²²⁰ HB 25/59 Vol. I, Minutes of Trust Meeting, 8 May 1959.

²²¹ HB 25/16/59, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 30 Dec 1960.

²²² HB 25/59 Vol. II, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 19 Apr 1961.

²²³ HB 25/16/59, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 30 Dec 1960.

the flats out at lower rates.²²⁴ The protest should have alerted the Board to the fire victims' unhappiness with the high rents: its officials had known that 'it will still be easier to let out a three room flat at \$90 than a one room unit at \$35 or \$40'. The HDB was subsequently forced to consider housing labourers employed by the Board in the 280 vacant 1-room communal flats in Tiong Bahru,²²⁵ which would help release the labourers' housing to the public.²²⁶ But only about 25 units were so used by January 1962, partly because many of the labourers had large families of seven or more persons.²²⁷

By April 1961, only 168 flats had been utilised for the victims of the Tiong Bahru fire. The breakdown of figures is telling: all the 91 3-room terrace houses were taken up by the fire victims, but only 72 of the 190 2-room flats and a mere five of the 280 1-room flats with communal toilets!²²⁸ The fire proved to be a blessing in disguise for Samuel Seetoh and his large family of ten, who had been living at Kallang Estate and had been struggling to eke out a living. They moved happily into one of the 2-storey, 3-room terrace houses. With more than \$1,000 collected from relief payments, they were able to pay off the loans taken out for Seetoh's father's business and buy some furniture for the house. It was, according to Seetoh, the beginning of 'good times' for the family.²²⁹ However, the vacant emergency housing was soon to become extremely useful for another fire in the locality.

Even as the Tiong Bahru emergency housing was being completed by the HDB, the Board was carrying out a second prong of the plan to redevelop the kampong areas. In April 1960, the HDB began to regularise some 3,800 tenancies in Kampong Tiong Bahru, MacPherson South and Toa Payoh.²³⁰ This measure sought to bring dwellers of unauthorised housing under official regulation when 'new areas are acquired and management is to be assumed by the Board pending clearance and

²²⁴ *ST*, 18 Dec 1960.

²²⁵ HB 25/59 Vol. II, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 17 Nov 1960; Minutes of Board Meeting, 11 Nov 1960.

²²⁶ HB 25/59 Vol. II, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 21 Oct 1960.

²²⁷ HB 25/16/59, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Acting PS, MND, 17 Jan 1962.

²²⁸ HB 25/59 Vol. II, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 19 Apr 1961.

²²⁹ *Report of the Hawkers Inquiry Commission*, p. 8.

²³⁰ HB 364/58, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, to Assistant Secretary, HDB, 25 Apr 1960.

development, e.g. Covent Garden, Kampong Tiong Bahru'.²³¹ Because the tenancy agreement contained full details of the structures and occupation of the land, it was a more effective instrument of control than the TOL and served as 'a valuable guide to future clearance commitments'.²³² The Board aimed to issue tenancies to the owners of 450-odd wooden houses (occupied by approximately 900 families) on land acquired after the Tiong Bahru fire and to require the owners to pay rentals to the Board. The Board explained to the owners that the SIT, after acquiring the land, had not regularised the tenancies and had not collected rent from them. In July, anticipating dissent against the regularisation work, the HDB started a pilot scheme for 20 dwellings located on a thickly-populated section of the fire site. The Board initially experienced some resistance, including personal representations from the wooden house dwellers and their Assemblyman.²³³ One letter signed by 32 petitioners to Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew protested against the high rates and pointed out that Ong Eng Guan, the former HDB Chairman, had promised to assess the land 'at a nominal monthly rental in order not to let us suffer'. The petition pleaded that 'many of us, squatters, are unemployed and are in fact unable to make ends meet' and that 'although we luckily escaped from the big fire, we are not lucky enough to get a fair deal from the Housing and Development Board. Instead of sparing us the chance of living, the Board is in fact trying to squeeze us dry and let us, poor squatters, die of starvation'.²³⁴ Following a representation to the government by Lee Teck Him, PAP Assemblyman for Tiong Bahru, the ten house owners anticipated their rentals would be reduced.²³⁵ Aware that the surrounding houses had not been issued with the notices, they adopted a waiting game. However, eventually all the ten owners except one (who owned seven wooden houses) accepted the scheme. The HDB imposed a 40% levy on the revenue the house owners collected from their tenants, in order to discourage the building and renting of unauthorised wooden housing on Board land.²³⁶ Many of the house owners paid nominal rentals of \$1-\$3 to the landowners but collected full rents totalling up to

²³¹ HB 364/58, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, to Assistant Secretary, HDB, 22 Apr 1960.

²³² HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 26.

²³³ HB 364/58, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 4 Nov 1960.

²³⁴ HB 364/58, Letter from 32 House Owners in Tiong Bahru to the Prime Minister, 25 Oct 1960.

²³⁵ HB 364/58, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, to CEO, HDB, 17 Sep 1960.

²³⁶ HB 364/58, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 4 Nov 1960; HB 74/1/59, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Acting PS, MND, 30 Nov 1960.

\$195 from each of their tenants.²³⁷ The HDB pilot scheme was subsequently expanded to the whole kampong. By February 1961, 355 out of 426 cases had accepted their tenancy agreements.²³⁸ By June, only 35 cases remained outstanding, although 22 were expected to be difficult.²³⁹

The attempts of the British and Labour Front administrations to build a new, modern Singapore on the ashes of burned-out urban kampongs were not often successful. It was consistently easier to provide immediate fire relief for the fire victims than to find permanent accommodation for them. Through the Social Welfare Department, the British and Labour Front governments were able to coordinate efforts to temporarily shelter fire victims and collect and distribute larger amounts of relief payment. But in the provision of long-term accommodation, the authorities' record was unimpressive. The Singapore Improvement Trust's emergency housing programme was, really, a half-hearted endeavour to fight fire by building allegedly low-cost but superior modern housing on wasted urban spaces like dumping grounds, cemeteries and sites of burnt out kampongs. The Trust's planners, however, frustrated in their attempts to regulate unauthorised wooden housing, worried about emergency housing similarly escaping official control to become new 'black areas'. The SIT's efforts were consequently ambiguous and reactive. In terms of the quality of housing, many low-income fire victim families evidently saw little difference between emergency housing and wooden dwellings, and many in fact returned to the latter after a fire. However, a major slowdown in the Trust's permanent housing programme and the increasing politicisation of rehousing fire victims led to an important shift in policy by the end of the 1950s. Following the 1959 Kampong Tiong Bahru fire, an emergency housing project was commenced at the fire site and the nearby cemetery. Although the response from the fire victims was again disappointing, the development of the project was to coincide with a far greater inferno that would mark a turning point in the history of Singapore.

²³⁷ HB 364/58, Letter from CEO, HDB, to Member of Legislative Assembly for Tiong Bahru, 7 Sep 1960.

²³⁸ HB 364/58, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, to Financial Officer, HDB, 4 Feb 1961.

²³⁹ HB 69/57 Vol. I, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, to Financial Officer, HDB, 1 Jun 1961.

Chapter 6

The Unprecedented Inferno

174-A Kampong Tiong Bahru, about 3 pm

Sometime around 3 pm on Thursday, 25 May 1961, an attap house behind King's Theatre in Si Kah Teng began to smoulder. Chinese newspaper reports placed the time at 2.50 to 3 pm,¹ while the Singapore Fire Brigade stated that it received 'obviously a late call' at 3.15 pm.² The burning house, according to the *Nanyang Siang Pau*, was No. 174-A atop the highest point of Tiong Bahru hill.³ According to an old lady who claimed to have stayed in the house for more than ten years, it had been burned down during the Japanese Occupation but was subsequently rebuilt.⁴ Tay Bok Chiu, who lived along Tiong Bahru Road about 200 yards away from 174-A, was awoken from his afternoon nap by shouts of 'Fire!'. Rushing out of his house, Tay saw the blaze swirling powerfully. 174-A, he maintained, was occupied by a couple, their mother, two daughters, and a son; the family made buns at home and their stove had caught fire that afternoon.⁵

The cause of the fire at 174-A was attributed to emotive albeit inconsistent claims of arson on the very day. The *Nanyang Siang Pau* carried interviews with fire victims claiming to have resided nearby and who 'confidently' recounted how 'the fire was caused not by Heaven but by scoundrels more evil than wild beasts'.⁶ A middle-aged man staying behind 174-A was, by his own account, resting at home by his window when he heard a whisper, '*Bo lang, bo lang, kin!*' ('No one here, no one, quick!'). Peering out of the window, however, he saw a Chinese man squatting in a small lane between his house and the opposite house two to three feet away. A young man standing next to him proceeded to throw a flaming torch onto the roof of

¹ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

² FD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 6.

³ *NYSP*, 28 May 1961.

⁴ *NYSP*, 28 May 1961.

⁵ Author's interview with Tay Bok Chiu, 24 Jan 2007. Tay's account is corroborated by his friend, Tay Ah Chuan. Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

⁶ *NYSP*, 28 May 1961.

the opposite house. It brushed the rooftop and fell back onto the ground. The man hurled another torch, which landed on the attap, which immediately began to burn. A third torch landed on another side of the roof. The middle-aged man yelled out a warning and threw open his door but the arsonist and his lookout had fled into a small lane at the side of the burning house. Being physically weak, he had not taken but two strides before the two men totally disappeared from sight. He stumbled back into his own house to save his eight children; the fire was already beginning to move down the hill. Residents in nearby houses, now alerted and crying out in panic, assisted the young and elderly, salvaged what personal belongings they could and fled for their lives. Interestingly, by his own account, the middle-aged man had prevented an arson attempt on another nearby house five months ago, extinguishing a torch which had fallen off the roof and landed on an altar.⁷

An elderly Chinese man standing on the side of Tiong Bahru Road that day, speaking animatedly to people around him, partially corroborated the account. He had, he maintained, also stayed near 174-A. One of his neighbours was a taxi driver who was standing outside his house that afternoon and had seen two young men throw something onto an attap roof, which began to burn soon afterward. The elderly man kept shaking his head, saying, ‘This fire was started by someone, some heartless person(s) started the fire!’.⁸

Another self-proclaimed eye-witness told a variant of the story – a lady who was also a neighbour of 174-A. The house, according to her, belonged to a Hokkien woman in her 50s and was rented out to a taxi driver and his family. At the time of the fire, the eye-witness was collecting her laundry at the side of her house. She went to pick up her month-old baby who had crawled into the small lane beside 174-A. There she saw a person throw a flaming torch onto the roof of the house. She panicked and, grabbing her child in her arms, shouted, ‘Someone is starting a fire! Fire!’ The arsonist fled and quickly disappeared from sight. Upon hearing her cries, the taxi driver, who had returned home earlier and was taking an afternoon nap, rushed out of the house and tried to stamp out the flames from the torch which had fallen onto the ground. The burning object was made of cotton wool, drenched in oil

⁷ *NYSP*, 28 May 1961.

⁸ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

and bundled up with wire, resembling a cleaning brush. But the fire was already beyond control and the occupants of nearby houses were beginning to flee. Most of the adults, it appeared, were out at work and there were consequently few able-bodied persons around to fight the flames.⁹

The *Sin Chew Jit Poh* reported what appeared to be the definitive account. The newspaper interviewed the aforementioned ‘taxi driver’ at the fire site, whose name was Huang Qingchao, a young Hokkien man who managed pirate taxis. According to Huang, he was not at home at the time of the fire and came to know of it only from others. Huang claimed, ‘Someone had set the fire’, but was unable to say who or why. His neighbour was Mrs Zhang, Hokkien, 35, the owner of a *fried kway teow* stall in Tiong Bahru. Zhang maintained that she was inside her house when she heard someone outside yell out ‘Fire!’. She rushed out to see the roof of 174-A already ablaze.¹⁰

The flames fed on the strong wind and searing heat. A drought had recently descended upon the island, producing temperatures as high as 32 degrees Celsius.¹¹ The attap on the roofs of wooden houses were scorched tinder-dry and had become highly flammable.¹² The scale of the unfolding calamity and the speed with which it moved was extremely difficult for the residents to comprehend. Madam Lee Ah Moh, 39, living on Tiong Bahru hill, explained,

Everyone thought that the fire would not reach us. I wanted to borrow a phone to call the Fire Brigade but no one would lend their phone. In the past, phones were uncommon. Then the fire came towards the top of the hill at us. *Si ah!* [‘Die!’] This side was burning, that side was burning. We ran from the foot of the hill. *Wah*, at first the fire appeared to be quite small. When we had taken a few of our belongings from our house, *wah*, the great fire had already set our roof alight. It burned like *bing bing biang biang*. The fire was

⁹ In this account, a young owner, in his teens, of a provisions shop nearby, who saw the attap roof catch fire, also shouted out aloud, ‘Fire!’. *NYSP*, 28 May 1961.

¹⁰ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

¹¹ *NFWP*, 26 May 1961.

¹² *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

relentless. Run, run! We took out our belongings. Some of the belongings we dragged away. Other people dragged our belongings and we dragged theirs, it was the same.¹³

Within approximately ten minutes, Si Kah Teng had become a 'hill of fire', engulfed by high walls of flame and clouds of smoke billowing into the sky; within the space of five minutes, most of the wooden houses on the hill had already been destroyed.¹⁴ The Three Kings' Temple situated on the hill was swiftly reduced to ruins. Bob Peries, a *Straits Times* reporter at Si Kah Teng at 3.40 pm, summarily reported, 'The whole hillside is ablaze'.¹⁵ At about 4 pm, all that remained of the northern section of Si Kah Teng were scattered piles of charred tree branches and the blackened ashes of dwellings.¹⁶

The expanding zone of fire was prevented from moving eastwards by a block of SIT flats north of King's Theatre. To the west stood another group of SIT flats built after the 1959 fire; there, Samuel Seetoh and his family, victims of the earlier blaze, watched the growing conflagration but were not duly worried in their public housing.¹⁷ But to the north, there was no effective fire break or barrier, and the northwesterly wind drove the flames down the hill so quickly that within twenty minutes, the houses standing on the southern side of Tiong Bahru Road were destroyed.¹⁸ Sheets of burning zinc and attap roofing were lifted into the air 'like kites', enabling the flames to jump Tiong Bahru Road.¹⁹ Tan Kok Kiem (born 1945), staying in a Singapore Improvement Trust flat at Boon Tiong Road, saw the zinc sheets fly '半天' ('halfway into the sky').²⁰

The blaze advanced towards a barber shop along the main road. The owner, who had lived there for many years, was attending to a customer when he heard

¹³ NAS, audio-visual recording titled *A Pictorial Exhibition: The Emergence Of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation To Progress*, broadcast in Nov 1983.

¹⁴ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁵ *ST*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁶ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁷ Author's interview with Samuel Seetoh, 27 Apr 2007.

¹⁸ *ST*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁹ Author's interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

²⁰ Author's interview with Tan Kok Kiem, 8 Feb 2007.

about the approaching fire; alarmed, he told the customer to leave. Realising that the fire would soon reach the shop, his family hastily brought their belongings outside. Suddenly the wind changed direction and turned the flames away from the shop and across the road into Bukit Ho Swee. The fortunate barber had also escaped the 1959 Kampong Tiong Bahru fire.²¹ Another barber shop in the area, owned by Pang Ming Toh's family, was also threatened by the fire. After Pang's mother packed 'a bit' of their belongings, they quickly fled. But their house, made of brick, survived.²²

Wang Bao, an old widow who had lived in a wooden house on the lower slopes of the hill for thirty years, miraculously escaped disaster for a third time:

28 years ago, when my eldest grandson was born, a great fire broke out in Bukit Ho Swee. At that time, the fire burned across Tiong Bahru Road to this side [*Points at Si Kah Teng*], reached our neighbour's house but did not burn our house....At that time, the fire was also very great. The whole of Bukit Ho Swee was destroyed. I still remember that year was the year of the Dog....Counting back, it has been exactly 28 years. After the first great fire 28 years ago, the second fire was the 1959 fire. At that time, the fire also reached the side of my house. Those houses that were burned down have now been replaced by new flats, and people have already moved in.....This time, the fire reached the front of my door. The nearest house that was burned down was very nearby but again my house was not burned'.²³

Tay Bok Chiu's family had a similar fortunate experience. His father had been prepared for the worst, telling the family, 'It's OK as long as we are safe. If the fire comes, we will run, no need to bring anything. It's also useless to bring anything along'. But the blaze veered away from their house; 'when the fire was very great, there was a female spirit medium, who was a Guanyin, 40-50 years old and wearing the medium's clothes. She was holding rice and salt in her hands and when she

²¹ NYSP, 26 May 1961.

²² Author's interview with Pang Ming Toh, 2 Nov 2006. Pang's family's barber shop was not the one described immediately prior, as his father had passed away by the time of the fire.

²³ NYSP, 26 May 1961.

reached our house, she said, “Don’t be afraid, I will not let the fire burn your house”. And then she scattered some rice and salt around our house. I have no idea where the medium came from. I don’t know her. It was miraculous’.²⁴

A fog of thick, black smoke soon descended upon Tiong Bahru Road, forcing the crowd which had gathered there, both fire victims and onlookers, to retreat. The din in the area – of the roar of fire and people shouting and crying – was tremendous. The sudden fiery onslaught both surprised and dispersed many families. At the eastern end of Tiong Bahru Road, as Plate 6.1 shows, a woman flees from the fire with four children in tow – two boys and a girl holding one another’s hands and a toddler strapped to the back of one of the boys – but her husband is nowhere to be seen.²⁵ Elsewhere, a volunteer from a kampong fire-fighting squad carries an old man piggy-back away from the fire, while a young Malay man similarly guided an old Chinese man to safety.²⁶



Plate 6.1: A family fleeing from the fire at Tiong Bahru Road. HDB, audio-visual recording titled *Bukit Ho Swee Fire, 25 May 1961*, 1961 (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

Along Tiong Bahru Road, regular fire-fighters and Si Kah Teng’s volunteer fire-fighting squads, including a squad organised by the Singapore Rural Residents’ Association, struggled against the towering inferno which had engulfed the row of

²⁴ Author’s interview with Tay Bok Chiu, 24 Jan 2007. Mediums purportedly receive the spirit of Chinese deities. Guanyin is the Goddess of Mercy.

²⁵ HDB, audio-visual recording titled *Bukit Ho Swee Fire, 25 May 1961*, 1961.

²⁶ *ST*, 26 May 1961; SWD, *Annual Report 1961*, Special Pictorial Section.

shophouses and wooden houses on both sides of the road.²⁷ Here, as in fire spots further north, the residents used hoses, buckets and any containers they could lay their hands on to fight the blaze.²⁸ But the wind-driven fire could not easily be halted by the few available water hoses that had not been burned through by the flames.²⁹ A fire-fighter said helplessly, 'It is impossible to fight a fire of this size, let alone trying to control it'.³⁰ The water pressure was far too weak, with five fire engines rendered useless on Tiong Bahru Road. At 3.30 pm, the Fire Brigade attempted to raise the water pressure by closing off mains in other areas but this measure was not totally successful as several hydrants were connected to the single mains in Tiong Bahru.³¹ When a fire-fighter, standing on a turntable ladder on the fire engine, applied his jet, a mere trickle of water came out, which only wet his uniform.³² In general, water was in such short supply that fire-fighters were forced to recycle water from the hoses which had flowed into drains.³³

Further compounding these problems for the fire victims were the difficult terrain and lack of access to the wooden houses. Much of the fire-fighting that day was directed at the flanks of the inferno, not its heart. At Si Kah Teng, the Fire Brigade's fire engines drew water from hydrants located at Jalan Membina and Tiong Bahru Road and could only aim seven jets at the flames raging along these roads.³⁴ There was, according to Jaafar Sabar of the Auxiliary Fire Service, no precise information about the fire site: 'We did not know the exact place. The squatters were all over the place. It was difficult to walk and the fire engines could not go very far'.³⁵ Fire-fighters had to join as many as five hoses together in a zig zag fashion to get close to the kampong houses; this, according to Sabar, substantially weakened the water pressure.³⁶ Soh Boon Quee, living at Silat Road, helped to unload hoses from a fire engine which had arrived there. But he found that

²⁷ NYSP, 26 May 1961.

²⁸ ST, 26 May 1961.

²⁹ NYSP, 26 May 1961; SFP, 26 May 1961.

³⁰ ST, 26 May 1961.

³¹ SLAD, 31 May 1961, p. 1593.

³² Joan Hon, *100 Years of the Singapore Fire Service* (Singapore: Produced & published for Singapore Fire Service by Times Books International, 1988), p. 78.

³³ Hon, *100 Years of the Singapore Fire Service*, p. 78.

³⁴ FD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 7.

³⁵ Oak3 Films, *Jalan 2: The Bukit Ho Swee Fire*, broadcast on 11 Dec 2006.

³⁶ OHC, interview with Jaafar Sabar, 29 Jul 1987.

the hoses could only reach a few houses and then ‘the houses went up like – *woom!* Just like that’.³⁷

The struggle against the blaze was also seriously hampered by the lack of manpower immediately available for fire-fighting and crowd control. As it was a public holiday for Muslims – Hari Raya Haji³⁸ – most of the fire-fighters, being Malay Muslims, had been on leave. The Fire Brigade had initially despatched only two fire engines which, upon arriving, found the wooden houses on both sides of Tiong Bahru Road ablaze.³⁹ They quickly radioed Fire Control to ‘Make Pump 3’ (to despatch another fire engine to make three pumps in total) and four minutes later to ‘Make Pump 6’.⁴⁰ But apparently, it was, as the *Straits Times* reported, at least an hour – 4 pm – before an island-wide radio alert recalled fire-fighters and policemen who were on leave to their posts, and another hour before they straggled onto the fire site, with many police arriving with helmets but not uniforms.⁴¹ Consequently, the Fire Brigade had to seek assistance from other fire services; as fire officer Arthur Lim later recalled, ‘We could not cope really, we had to call the British army to help’.⁴² The Fire Control Room was also flooded with calls of frightened residents living in the locality and those residing further away worried about the spread of the blaze.⁴³ The *Sin Chew Jit Poh* lamented that forty minutes after the fire began, ‘on the four sides of Tiong Bahru, there was still no sign of the police or riot police’.⁴⁴ A ‘security officer’ at the scene, speaking to the paper’s reporter at this time, complained, ‘When the fire broke out, I made a phone call to them [the police]. Why have they not arrived till now?’⁴⁵ The full fire-fighting force that day totalled 22 fire engines, comprising 16 from the Singapore Fire Brigade, 4 from the British Army Fire Service, 1 from the Royal Air Force, and 1 from the Harbour Board Fire Service.⁴⁶ Three million gallons of water, some of which was drawn from the

³⁷ Author’s interview with Soh Boon Quee, 4 Feb 2007.

³⁸ A religious festival celebrated by Muslims in the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar, marking the day of pilgrimage to Mecca. The English-language press dubbed the fire the ‘Hari Raya inferno’.

³⁹ FD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 6.

⁴⁰ Hon, *100 Years of the Singapore Fire Service*, p. 78.

⁴¹ ST, 26 May 1961. According to the Malay newspaper *Berita Harian*, fire-fighters and policemen on leave were only recalled around 5 pm. BH, 26 May 1961.

⁴² OHC, interview with Arthur Lim Beng Lock, 7 Jan 1994.

⁴³ OHC, interview with Arthur Lim Beng Lock, 7 Jan 1994.

⁴⁴ SCJP, 26 May 1961.

⁴⁵ SCJP, 26 May 1961.

⁴⁶ SLAD, 31 May 1961, pp. 1592-3.

Singapore River to the northeast, and 33,650 feet of hose were used.⁴⁷ The Singapore Fire Brigade maintained that the pumps, which supplied 51 jets in total, were directed to ‘strategic positions in Tiong Bahru Road, Havelock Road, Ganges Avenue, Delta Circus, Nile Road and Beo Lane’.⁴⁸ But by this time, the inferno had established new and growing fronts north of Tiong Bahru Road.



Plate 6.2: A fire engine is immobilised on the side of the road amid the surging crowd as Kampong Bukit Ho Swee burns in the distance (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

Traffic on the carriageway swiftly came to a standstill, with 25 buses of the Hock Lee Bus Company stranded by the roadside at the mouth of Boon Tiong Road. Opposite King’s Theatre, police erected a roadblock to stop incoming traffic. At 4 pm, the traffic piled up a kilometre long from the City area. Tan Ah Kok, living in ‘Big Town’, was coming to King’s Theatre to watch a movie. Seeing the traffic jam and hearing about the fire, she panicked, alighted from the bus and rushed back to

⁴⁷ NAS, audio-visual recording titled *A Pictorial Exhibition: The Emergence Of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation To Progress*, broadcast in Nov 1983; OHC, interview with Goh Leng Huat, 1 Feb 2001.

⁴⁸ FD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 7.

the school where she had dropped off her eldest son. 'I heard that the fire was flying about', Tan explained, 'and I was so scared that it would fly over to my home'; afterwards, she hurried home, for 'I had two kids at home and my mother's feet was bound, so she could not have carried kids to safety. If she panicked, that would have been the end'.⁴⁹ A young painter, carrying a three-legged easel, stepped out of the crowd on Tiong Bahru Road. He faced the fire and started sketching, attracting a crowd of curious spectators. The artist, they saw, was working on an oil painting of Si Kah Teng, showing the raging fire destroying wooden houses and the fire-fighters and volunteers struggling against the mounting flames. A passerby, struck by the painting, muttered to himself, 'People's houses have already been burned down yet he is still here painting'.⁵⁰

Beo Lane and Bukit Ho Swee, from 3.30 pm

At about 3.30 pm, the fire reached Beo Lane. Here, as was the case in the 1934 disaster, there was no water available on the high ground or ready access to the heart of the blaze, although Beo Lane was wide enough for a car to pass through.⁵¹ 'The worst damage and which left the most horrible impression', the *Nanyang Siang Pau* reported, 'was at Beo Lane', where 'the fire burned the houses like a child burns paper houses'.⁵² The flames swiftly fanned out in all directions, burning the Tiong Bahru sewerage works and engulfing numerous wooden houses in a sea of fire. A large, 2-storey house close to Tiong Bahru Road with brick tiles, which had accommodated about 30 families totaling more than 200 people, was quickly reduced to ashes.⁵³ The encounter of the flames with the soya sauce, cooking oil, charcoal, and flammable chemicals stored in the warehouses and factories in the area intensified its ferocity, with fingers of fire shooting high into the sky and rumbling explosions ringing out continuously. The *Taishang Laojun* ('太上老君') Temple⁵⁴ still standing on the hill was half-raised, while only the front portion of the roof of

⁴⁹ Author's interview with Tan Ah Kok, 22 Mar 2007.

⁵⁰ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

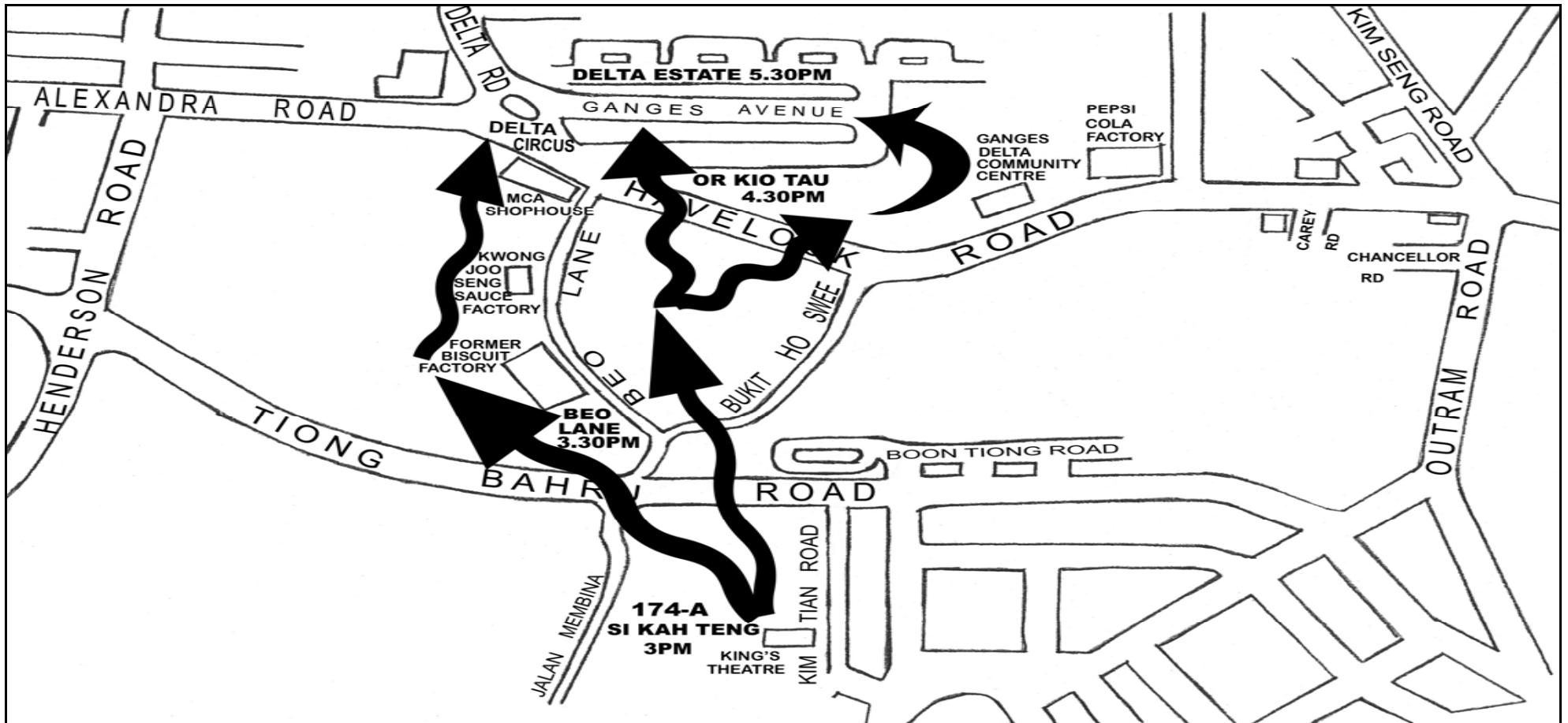
⁵¹ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

⁵² *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

⁵³ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

⁵⁴ Honouring the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, who was subsequently deified.

Map 6.1 Path of the 1961 Kampong Bukit Ho Swee Fire



Compiled from Maps 80-81, *Street Directory and Guide to Singapore* (Singapore: Survey Department, 1957); *ST*, 26 May 1961; *NYSP*, 26 May 1961; *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.



Plate 6.3: The inferno rages in the distance as onlookers observe dark clouds of billowing smoke (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

another temple, *Qingzhai Si* (‘清齋寺’), remained intact. But when the middle portion caved in, the debris extinguished the flames and saved the house of a family residing in front of the temple.⁵⁵ The Nanyang Sawmill behind Boon Tiong Road, which was insured, was spared but its warehouse containing goods worth nearly \$10,000 was razed to the ground. Behind the sawmill, however, were more houses, which would have been gutted if the mill had not escaped disaster.⁵⁶ Bella Leong, staying at Kim Tian Road, rushed to the coffee beans warehouse where she worked as a supervisor, worried that her workplace would be destroyed; miraculously, she watched the fire go around the warehouse.⁵⁷ The seemingly-arbitrary and erratic nature of the path of destruction – in which some buildings survived by the barest margin – added to the mythic power of the inferno in the imagination of the fire victims and the public at large.

⁵⁵ *NYSP*, 27 May 1961.

⁵⁶ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

⁵⁷ Author’s interview with Bella Leong, 5 Oct 2006.

The struggle to contain the fire at two major buildings in Beo Lane, Kwong Joo Seng Sauce Factory and *Da Dongrong* (‘大东荣’) Warehouse, captured the ferocity of the fiery assault and the devastation of the local economy. Fire-fighters from the Singapore Fire Brigade, the British military and the local fire-fighting squads battled desperately to save both buildings. At *Da Dongrong*, stores of sulfuric acid and paint caught fire, causing a series of mighty explosions, flashing sparks and thick acrid smoke. Fire-fighters, organised into small teams with four or five hoses each, continued to hose down the flames but the advancing fire and toxic smoke, fanned by a strong wind, forced them to abandon their hoses and retreat. At Kwong Joo Seng factory, as fire-fighters vainly aimed water jets at the flames from outside, the fire swallowed the oil drums within minutes and consumed the entire factory in flame, causing further explosions.⁵⁸ Workers hastily moved some of the factory’s goods to the brick buildings opposite, believing them to be safe from the fire there. Afterwards, they found that all that remained of the brick buildings were a few collapsed walls.⁵⁹ Kwong Joo Seng burned for three hours.⁶⁰

By 7 pm, the wooden houses in Beo Lane and Bukit Ho Swee were no more, although the flames, feeding on the flammable chemicals deposited on the near side of Havelock Road, continued to rage.⁶¹ At 8 pm, the *Straits Times* journalist Francis Rozario reported, ‘Fire [is] still at its height’.⁶² The inferno destroyed Kai Kok Public School and about sixty premises in the locality, including various coffeeshops, teahouses, provisions shops, laundry shops, trading companies, and an eating house, a sawmill, a clinic, a beer house, a hairdresser, a departmental store, an automobile company, a car repair shop, and a goldsmith.⁶³ The fire engulfing Kwong Yuan Heng Sauce Factory only burned itself out at around 9 pm, with the factory’s Chinese name, ‘广源兴’, still visible on a blackened wall.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

⁵⁹ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

⁶⁰ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

⁶¹ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

⁶² *ST*, 26 May 1961.

⁶³ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

⁶⁴ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

The speed at which the inferno rampaged through the kampong defeated the residents' attempts to contain the flames and punished most gestures of mutual self-help. Tay Ah Chuan was revising for his third year Senior Middle examinations at the premises of the Chuen Min Old Boys' Association. Some of his school mates, being part of the association's fire-fighting squad, rushed to help fight the fire but returned home only to find their homes razed to the ground. Tay and several family members had rushed to help his uncle save the goods from his provisions shop but also returned home to find his own house gutted.⁶⁵ Lee Boon Eng, 67, similarly recounted that his friends tried to help the villagers remove their belongings, only to be told that their own houses had been destroyed.⁶⁶ Wong Pok Hee was working in the provisions shop at the Or Kio Tau shophouse. He had initially gone to Tiong Bahru Road to watch the fire but because he was working, 'I couldn't watch too long and didn't see the fire fly over'. Later in the afternoon, he heard that 'the fire was spreading to many places, so I ran back home. The fire had already burned down my house. I had no time to move out our things. My family was not at home. My mother and siblings were out working'.⁶⁷



⁶⁵ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

⁶⁶ NAS, audio-visual recording titled *A Pictorial Exhibition: The Emergence Of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation To Progress*, broadcast in Nov 1983.

⁶⁷ Author's interview with Wong Pok Hee, 19 Apr 2007.

Plate 6.4: Sweat-drenched men attempt to establish a fire break by demolishing a wooden house. Note that the house on the right is fairly well-maintained. Both houses also have zinc roofing (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

Many of the residents in the thickly-populated area encountered unmitigated tragedy. Sim Kim Boey's house was totally gutted; she managed to retrieve only some clothes and was personally struck *gong* ('stunned') by the scale of the disaster.⁶⁸ Chen Yin Foo (born 1948), son of a lorry driver, and his family abandoned their house, furniture, clothes, and a sealed Ovaltine tin to the flames; when they retrieved the tin afterwards, they found the coins inside blackened.⁶⁹ As the fire neared their house at 10 Beo Lane, policemen and Gurkhas took Lim Soo Hiang and her siblings to the relief centre. Lim's mother, however, insisted on remaining in her provisions shop, as her goods had not been insured. She was finally persuaded to leave, when the fire reached Kwong Joo Seng factory nearby, and was reunited with the children only at nightfall. When they returned later to the fire site, they found their shop still standing but 'there was nothing left – canned food, drinks, rice, sweets – everything had been carted away by people'. The family had saved some clothes and jewellery but their looted provisions and cash were lost to the inferno.⁷⁰ At 22 Beo Lane, Lim You Meng, wearing only a pair of shorts and barefoot, had watched his house burn down before running away. 'It was', he recalled, 'like burning a paper house during funerals, over in an instant'. His family moved their belongings to the upper storey of the medical hall in the Or Kio Tau shophouse but the medical hall was also later gutted. His parents lost everything, except for the children's birth certificates and their own citizenship papers – 'they were very mindful of this and were not concerned with other things'. The family ran to Delta Estate to watch the subsequent course of the fire. Lim admitted that he did not feel anything about the fire as he was young but '[m]y parents were very sad. They had just lost everything, clothes, photographs, but they didn't cry'.⁷¹

Nor were material losses the sole cause of anguish. Throughout the day, the fire dispersed numerous families and intensified the general sense of panic and pandemonium. Zhong Guiying, staying at No. 83 Beo Lane, sat dumbly on a grass

⁶⁸ Author's interview with Sim Kim Boey, 14 Feb 2007.

⁶⁹ Author's interview with Chen Yin Foo, 2 Feb 2007.

⁷⁰ Author's interview with Lim Soo Hiang, 2 Jan 2008.

⁷¹ Author's interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

patch bordering the fire site, weeping silently. At 2 pm, she had gone to visit her husband, an unemployed tailor suffering from tuberculosis who was warded at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. She left behind her four children at home, aged 3, 5, 9, and 15 years old. Halfway through her journey, Zhong saw the sky lit up by the fire and hurried back home but her house and children were gone. Despite the efforts of the police and the staff of the Delta-Ganges Community Centre, she still had no news of the fate of her children at 9 pm.⁷²

Brothers Lee Ah Gar and Lee Soo Seong and their family were also separated by the fiery rampage. As it was a public holiday, Soo Seong was out with his friends. Ah Gar was at home at 12-E Beo Lane washing green beans (preparing the *tau suan* which his father would sell the following day), while his young son had accompanied his father to Or Kio Tau market to buy groceries. Alerted about the fire, Ah Gar, who was bare-chested and wearing only a pair of shorts and without trying to salvage the family's belongings, immediately brought his mother and young daughter to the safety of a 4-storey block of flats at Boon Tiong Road, following which

I rushed back to Or Kio Tau and asked the house owner, if the fire reached the house, whether I could cut off the attap roof. He said OK. But just after saying this, the fire arrived, and it was hopeless. I was preparing for the fire in front but the flames had come up behind my back.

Ah Gar abandoned the house, hurrying back to his mother and daughter and bringing them to a 2-storey SIT flat at Jalan Membina, where a former neighbour was staying.⁷³ Soo Seong, returning home, was stopped at a roadblock along Tiong Bahru Road. His first thought was, 'Where is my family?' After asking around, friends informed him that his family was in Jalan Membina. Of the catastrophe, Soo

⁷² *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

⁷³ Author's interview with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006. Ah Gar does not remember how the family was finally reunited with his father and son.

Seong recalled, 'At that time, I could not accept it. Even in our dreams, we could not accept it'.⁷⁴

For long-established or elderly residents, the fire was an acutely traumatising experience severing tangible links to a familiar way of life. At 597-E Bukit Ho Swee, the parents of Oh Boon Eng and his younger sister Oh Gek Heok had not expected the fire at Si Kah Teng to jump over to their side of the hill and had simply hosed their attap roof with water. As the fire neared, they realised that the children had followed their neighbours to the Giok Hong Tian temple at the foot of the hill. They hurried down the hill in search of their children, leaving their house and belongings to the inferno, except for the birth certificates which they had the presence of mind to take with them. Gek Heok also recalled, 'Initially my grandfather didn't want to leave, he simply refused to leave. We shouted for him to come out of the house but he remained upstairs. His whole fortune was in the house. So my father went upstairs and carried him down. He was very upset afterwards'.⁷⁵

By sheer chance, some families had a comparatively less difficult experience. Beh Poh Suan was at home and carried her three-year-old child to safety, who otherwise would have been burned to death.⁷⁶ A young couple staying at Beo Lane had gone to watch a movie at King's Theatre and when it finished at 4 pm, they found their house reduced to ashes but fortunately, their two children inside had been brought away to safety by their nanny.⁷⁷ Every member of Chua Beng Huat's family was at home at 60 Bukit Ho Swee. Leaving their furniture to the flames, they and their neighbours jumped onto one of their two lorries parked outside their house, picked up his aunt's family living close by and made their way to Thomson Road, where their uncle had an empty house.⁷⁸ In other cases, families had tried to prepare for speedy evacuation in the event of a kampong fire. Wang Ah Tee had also gone out but found a way past the police roadblock into Beo Lane through the sewerage works. He found his family hastily packing and moving out their belongings. Their

⁷⁴ Author's interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006; OHC, interview with Lee Soo Seong, 19 Nov 1996.

⁷⁵ Author's interviews with Oh Boon Eng, 4 Apr 2007 and Oh Gek Heok, 1 Apr 2007. The temple referred to is the Giok Hong Tian Temple.

⁷⁶ Author's interview with Beh Poh Suan, 14 Feb 2007.

⁷⁷ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

⁷⁸ Author's interview with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006.

house at 37 Beo Lane, 'shielded' by a warehouse and sauce factory, escaped the inferno.⁷⁹ James Seah's mother had brought the children to their aunt's house and were on their way back when they saw a great column of smoke. They hurried back to their house at 20 Beo Lane, where Seah's mother swiftly packed some clothing and their birth certificates before they left. Seah surmised, 'In those days, most of those dwellers were always prepared in case of fire. So maybe they set aside some important things into one box'.⁸⁰

The minority whose homes survived the blaze pondered deeply about the meaning of their good fortune and the disaster. Peter Lim (born 1943) was at home. He initially asked his five brothers and sisters to line up and spray water all over the garden. As the fire approached, they packed some of their books and clothes and left the house. Lim's father, however, remained behind. The family heard no news of him into the night and thought, 'He's gone'. The next morning, Lim donned his cadet corps uniform and, dressed like a soldier, gained entry into the fire site. He made his way to his house:

And as I walked on the left, all hundreds of houses, all completely wiped out, not even one house remained, including the Chinese temples. And as I approached nearer, I couldn't imagine that my house could still remain, the whole house was not burned. The garden was burned, one section of the roof was burned, and the neighbouring 3-storey building had also collapsed. And the houses of my neighbours on our left and our neighbours behind, all Christian families, were not burned. All around us, including the house of the Malay family, all were burned. As I went into my house, because my father had used mosquito nets to cover his goods, the nets all had black dots, traces of the fire sparks that had come in. But thank God the fire had not come in. I found my father inside the house, and he was kneeling down on the ground praying to God, for mercy, for grace. He told us that the fire from the neighbouring 3-storey house had come into the garden and also wanted to come into the house, but

⁷⁹ Author's interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007.

⁸⁰ Author's interview with James Seah, 21 Oct 2006.

the hand of God was so miraculous that the wind somehow had redirected the fire outwards.⁸¹

Panic and desperation produced individual acts of courage, which were later lost in the grand narrative of the fire. Tay Yan Woon was alone at home: her father had gone on a tour of China, her mother was out hawking and her brothers were also working. It was clear that, although it was a public holiday, it was still a working day for many low-income families engaged in irregular or part-time employment. Tay panicked: 'I ran quickly for my life and didn't think to bring our belongings. I feared that our ducks would be burned to death, so instead I grabbed a few ducks and ran. I was so shocked that I did not think clearly'. She made it to Havelock Road and then Kim Seng.⁸² Sim Ah Tang (born 1932) and her husband had moved into a terrace house along Jalan Membina built by the Housing and Development Board after the 1959 blaze. But her family, comprising her blind mother and her brother and sister, were still living at Bukit Ho Swee. Upon seeing the flames and thick smoke, Sim asked a neighbour to take care of her daughter and ran barefoot from Jalan Membina to the fire site. Upon reaching her mother's house, her feet blistered, Sim took her to safety, while her sister brought along her young children. The fire, it appeared to Sim, seemed to be coming from everywhere.⁸³



⁸¹ Author's interview with Peter Lim, 8 Feb 2007.

⁸² Author's interview with Tay Yan Woon, 28 Sep 2006.

⁸³ Author's interview with Steven Teo, 3 Apr 2007.

Plate 6.5: Residents move their belongings as the flames, visible in the background, approach. Note the narrow passage they are moving through, and also the laundry hung out in the open which, most likely, would soon go up in flames (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 6.6: Mutual help in a calamity. Men carry bulky furniture up the hill, while others rush in the opposite direction to render assistance (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 6.7: Another group of young men, carrying a heavy cupboard, reach the foot of Ma Kau Thiong (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

At the junction of Beo Lane and Havelock Road, fire victims, having struggled down the hill, dumped what personal belongings they had brought out

with them – bags of clothes, various pieces of furniture and pots and pans.⁸⁴ Small teams of men worked feverishly to carry bulky furniture and other heavy household items down the hill. Some of the items were pre-bundled or tied up in case of fire or just before the family had fled. Other fire victims deposited their rescued belongings on the ground floors of the 4- and 5-storey, partially-built HDB blocks of flats on the southern part of Ma Kau Thiong, and at other blocks of flats in Tiong Bahru Estate and Kai Fook Mansion at Kim Tian Road.⁸⁵ One or two individuals stood guard watching over these piles of salvaged items, but it was painfully clear that the number of fire victims vastly outnumbered the amount of property that had been saved from the flames. The flats of Ma Kau Thiong, which had escaped the blaze, became popular ‘fire watching spots’, with hundreds of onlookers clambering onto the upper floors and even the rooftop to observe the unfolding fiery path of destruction in the area opposite the cemetery.⁸⁶

As the wooden houses on Bukit Ho Swee were rapidly destroyed, all the authorities could do was to set up a police roadblock at the entrance of Beo Lane to prevent people and possible looters from entering the fire site.⁸⁷ A long traffic jam stretched from Delta Circus to Delta and River Valley roads and as far as Alexandra Road. Fire victims, shell-shocked, slumped by the roadside. At about 8 pm, army soldiers cordoned off the main roads leading to the roundabout to prevent any further people from entering or leaving the stricken area.

⁸⁴ Author’s interview with Tan Ah Poh, 29 May 2007.

⁸⁵ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961; author’s interview with Bella Leong, 5 Oct 2006.

⁸⁶ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

⁸⁷ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.



Plate 6.8: In the top left corner of the photograph, onlookers are clearly visible inside the partially-completed block of emergency flats at Ma Kau Thiong. In the foreground, more onlookers and fire victims, with their belongings, have gathered at the foot of the cemetery (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 6.9: Fire victims guard their families' possessions at the foot of Ma Kau Thiong (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 6.10: The flames and towering clouds of smoke are visible from the foot of Ma Kau Thiong (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 6.11: An aerial view of the fire as it heads north towards Havelock Road, bypassing the partially-completed HDB flats on Ma Kau Thiong (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 6.12: The fire, driven by a strong wind, changes direction and moves northwest from Beo Lane towards Delta Estate. In the foreground are the Tiong Bahru Fire Site emergency housing and the Tiong Bahru sewerage works (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 6.13: The charred ruins of a kampong: Beo Lane after the fire. The MCA shophouse is to the right of the picture (Courtesy of Wong Pok Hee).

Or Kio Tau and Havelock Road, from roughly 4.30 pm

The blaze rolled down the hill towards Or Kio Tau at about 4.30 pm, engulfing a godown storing oil drums fronting Havelock Road. Havelock Road had become a temporary refuge for the homeless. As Jackie Sam, a *Straits Times* reporter covering the area, put it, Havelock Road now degenerated into pandemonium: 'Panic sweeps through the whole area. Crowd is getting out of control. Mad scramble on narrow road as fire fighters shoulder their way against the surge of fleeing people'. He added that 'a sea of humanity streams away from the fire', as '[s]creaming women, dragging children and personal belongings, stagger and fall as they run from the red fury'.⁸⁸ Fire victims, as the Malay-language *Berita Harian* reported, were 'swaying from side to side as they tried to run away from the fire'.⁸⁹ Many of them, like Madam Chng Ah Bek, an elderly lady, felt that 'the fire was very big...I can't describe it. I was overwhelmed by the sight of the fire. My legs felt weak even as I was running away'.⁹⁰ Inching their way through the dense human traffic were lorries, other vehicles and carts full of clothes, mattresses, furniture, and other personal belongings, while desperate fire victims on foot pushed sewing machines and lugged cupboards, tables and other furniture and personal belongings down the road.

The mass confusion along Havelock and Tiong Bahru roads worsened after 4.30 pm, as shocked men and women began returning home from work. Fragmented families sought frantically to locate their missing members. Among them was a middle-aged lady who had been working in a factory. Upon arriving home late in the afternoon and finding her house reduced to ashes, she cried out, 'Where is my child? My house is totally burned down, where is my child?' She fainted.⁹¹ A Malay grandmother, 69, one of the forty-odd Malay families living along Havelock Road, was at home with her two grandchildren, one of whom was a 21-day-old baby, as their parents had gone out to celebrate Hari Raya. When the fire broke out, the grandmother, panic-stricken, rushed out of the house carrying both grandchildren –

⁸⁸ *ST*, 26 May 1961.

⁸⁹ *BH*, 26 May 1961.

⁹⁰ SBC, audio-visual programme titled *Diary of a Nation: Bukit Ho Swee Fire, 25 May 1961*, broadcast on 25 May 1988.

⁹¹ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

or so she thought. It turned out that instead of the baby, she was carrying a *ti lam* ('mattress'). She hurried back and 'with the help of God' managed to save the other grandchild.⁹²

At Or Kio Tau, courageous residents and more than ten fire engines attempted to make a stand against the inferno. Lim You Meng saw fire-fighters quickly alight from one fire engine along Havelock Road to cut off the gas supply to his uncle's coffee shop at the Or Kio Tau shophouse.⁹³ Local youths climbed onto the roofs of wooden houses to pull off the attap while other residents doused the roofs with water or used axes, *parangs* and wooden poles to smash down walls and create fire breaks. Jackie Sam, reporting on the spot, applauded the '[m]agnificent teamwork' being displayed as numerous hands reached out to unload the hoses. But such gestures were in fact motivated by sheer desperation, since '[a]t many points, youths snatch the hoses from the firemen. A bedraggled woman kneels on the water-soaked road and begs fireman to save her burning house. Another youth, his face stained with tears, threatens to beat up a firemen because there is not enough water coming out of the hose'.⁹⁴ The Fire Brigade later stated,

Large numbers of willing helpers who numerically overwhelmed the firemen were quite uncontrolled and in some cases deliberately obstructed members of the Brigade from carrying out their duties (the driver of the SFB lorry carrying the spare hose to the fire-ground reported that when he arrived at Havelock Road, panic-stricken members of the public snatched all the hose from his lorry)....

Fire appliances had difficulty arriving at the fire-ground particularly on the Havelock Road side, and having arrived, found it almost impossible to proceed to vantage points for fire fighting operations owing to hundreds of private cars full of sight-seers attracted by the

⁹² *BH*, 27 May 1961.

⁹³ Author's interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

⁹⁴ *ST*, 26 May 1961.

smoke from the huge fire, which almost completely obstructed roads in the immediate vicinity.⁹⁵

Fire officer Chan Thai Ho stated that ‘we were trying to rush in, and the crowds and occupants rushing out. And all the onlookers. In fact it made our job a nightmare’.⁹⁶



Plate 6.14: Fire-fighters and policemen attempt to control the fire-fighting effort as volunteers unroll and even direct the fire hoses (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

The blaze, still driven by the swirling wind, could not be tamed. The Singapore Rural Residents' Association's Branch Office at Havelock Road Office was burned down. A local resident who had been out, upon hearing about the fire, drove back to Si Kah Teng but was stopped at the roadblock along Havelock Road. He left his car but returned later to find it ravaged by the flames.⁹⁷ By 5 pm, the inferno had become more ferocious than ever, forcing fire-fighters and fire engines to withdraw from both sides of Havelock Road. Two hours later, the row of shophouses facing Havelock Road was still ablaze. The Malayan Chinese

⁹⁵ FD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 7.

⁹⁶ SBC, audio-visual programme titled *Diary of a Nation: Bukit Ho Swee Fire, 25 May 1961*, broadcast on 25 May 1988.

⁹⁷ NYSP, 26 May 1961.



Plate 6.15: A shop on the ground floor of the MCA shophouse gutted by the flames (Courtesy of Wong Pok Hee).



Plate 6.16: Inspecting the damage to the shop. Note the adjoining shop is untouched by the fire (Courtesy of Wong Pok Hee).

Association shophouse at 778 Havelock Road survived, although many of the shops on its ground floor and the homes on the upper floor were gutted. One of the shops not destroyed was Hiap Soon, the charcoal shop owned by Ong Ah Sai's family. It

was, incredibly to Ong, spared by the fire. She was ‘frightened to death’ about the safety of her three children but a shop worker drove the family away from the fire zone.⁹⁸ Tan Nam Sia had almost finished selling his noodles at the Or Kio Tau market and was about to leave. He saw the blaze approach and pushed his cart away quickly.⁹⁹

Along Havelock Road, as elsewhere, the fire continued to wreck havoc with life as the residents had known it. Tan Tiam Ho had gone out to watch a movie but rushed home to bring his wife, Beh Swee Kim, who had been preparing porridge for dinner, and their two children to safety. They took with them their sewing machine and money but not the furniture. His house, which his family was subletting to tenants, was burned down. ‘I was stunned’, Tan explained, ‘I realised that we would be bankrupt’.¹⁰⁰ Zhou Lian Che was alone with her five children, the youngest just a week past his first month. Ah Lau, her husband, had, at her behest, gone into Bukit Ho Swee to help her elder sister save her belongings. Zhou, like so many others, had thought the fire would not reach Havelock Road. However, she watched the progress of the blaze from a window and soon realised that it would reach her house. She panicked. Recalling that she was ‘quite stupid’, she forgot to contact her father, who lived across Havelock Road from her. She took her most important valuables – her children and her sewing machine, a common heirloom for married Chinese women, and joined the displaced throng moving along Havelock Road towards Kim Seng Road:

The children grabbed the back of my blouse. And I was still carrying my baby. I kept pushing my sewing machine. That time I was *kong* (‘panicked’) and I just kept pushing until Kim Seng. My voice was totally gone. My baby was only a month old. The fire started from that side [Si Kah Teng]. Why after burning that side, it would jump over here? Why was it flying here and there? I kept looking one way. Then I realised that the other side was also burning. It was very fast.

⁹⁸ Author’s interview with Ong Ah Sai, 19 Apr 2007.

⁹⁹ Author’s interview with Tan Nam Sia, 3 May 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Author’s interviews with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007, and Beh Swee Kim, 22 Jan 2007.

There was a sauce factory at Or Kio Tau. *Bing bing biang biang!* I was very frightened when I heard that.¹⁰¹

The police initially directed the fire victims to the Delta-Ganges Community Centre but it quickly emptied as the flames approached. A sudden last-minute change in the wind direction saved the centre and the nearby Pepsi-Cola factory but not before burning down the wooden houses nearby. Teo Khoon Wah's brother had a friend, 'Ah Si', who lived in a wooden house near the community centre and went to help his friend in Bukit Ho Swee move their belongings at the start of the fire but came home to find his house burned down.¹⁰² In the same area also stood Ho Sing laundry shop, owned by Lum Siang Ho's family. Her brother-in-law, returning from King's Theatre, said that Si Kah Teng was burning. His father asked, 'What has it got to do with you? We are in Havelock Road, the fire is in Tiong Bahru. It's several streets away, how will the fire come over here?' When the blaze was approaching, Lum recounted, her father-in-law still could not believe it. By a fortunate twist of fate, their shop was spared.¹⁰³ On the other hand, my father had seen the fire when he came out of a cinema at Great World Amusement Park and had rushed home. There, he found that his family had packed their clothes. They fled to Kim Seng Road, where 'we stood there watching, to see if the fire would still come down to us or not'. When they finally returned home, their house was still standing. The scene of fire victims moving along Havelock Road, he recalled, was 'just like in a war'.¹⁰⁴

The residents of Hong Lim Pa Sat, who could see the flames clearly, heaved a collective sigh of relief. Teo Khoon Wah's family had moved their belongings, including cupboards and three-quarters of the furniture, onto the doorstep of their wooden house as the fire neared Delta-Ganges Community Centre; they were 'all struck dumb, children and adults'. The family thought 'that the belongings would be safe outside the house but of course the fire could as easily burn them up outside the house as inside. As the fire had not reached our place yet, we kept bringing out more things, including our pots'.¹⁰⁵ Joyce Soh had feared for her second sister, who had a

¹⁰¹ Author's interview with Zhou Lian Che, 21 Feb 2006.

¹⁰² Author's interview with Teo Khoon Wah, 23 Mar 2007.

¹⁰³ Author's interview with Lum Siang Onn, 4 Aug 2007.

¹⁰⁴ Author's interview with Loh Tian Ho, 13 Jan 2006.

¹⁰⁵ Author's interview with Teo Khoon Wah, 23 Mar 2007.

lame leg and would have to be carried away if the fire moved in the direction of their house at 52 Covent Garden. As the blaze veered away, leaving the Giok Hong Tian temple at Carey Road unscathed, she felt that Ti Kong ('the Heavenly God') had protected both the temple and her invalid sister.¹⁰⁶

The throng of fire victims along Havelock Road, according to the *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, looked 'as if they had been through a war'.¹⁰⁷ Madam Hu, caretaker at Fuk Tak Tong Temple, helped fire victims fleeing down the hill to move their belongings; she observed, 'They weren't heading anywhere, they just ran to places where there wasn't fire and then they would stop. There was no destination in their minds'.¹⁰⁸ Writer-poet Tian Liu later captured the sheer desolation of the landscape in a poem titled 'Fiery Plunder'. In the 'sea of humanity' moving along Havelock Road, he recalled, 'the woeful cries of fleeing people resemble those of wailing spirits!' There were, Liu observed, 'men, women, old, and young; their faces are a sheet of pale', among whom 'some mourn the loss of decades of savings and property', while 'others weep by the streets, uncertain of the whereabouts of separated family members!'.¹⁰⁹

Policemen began to direct the human mass of refugees and spectators eastwards towards Kim Seng Road but their attempt at crowd control was resisted desperately by individuals at various points in the area. 'Now and then', Jackie Sam reported, 'a man or a woman tries to rush into flaming houses. They are pulled back by Police and St. John Ambulance men'.¹¹⁰ A woman broke out of the crowd asking to be allowed to go to the other end of the road to look for her only child. A Punjabi milkman, with a trance-like smile on his face, walked to the edge of the fire. Pulled back by a policeman, he told him to mind his own business, for he wanted to be in his house when it caught fire.¹¹¹ An elderly woman dashed out of her house with two chickens but the police would not allow her to bring them. The crowd shouted to her to leave the chickens behind, and she finally did so, walking away sadly and

¹⁰⁶ Author's interview with Joyce Soh, 5 Apr 2007. Soh was referring to the Giok Hong Tian Temple.

¹⁰⁷ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁰⁸ Author's interview with Madam Hu, 8 Feb 2007.

¹⁰⁹ *SCJP*, 2 Jun 1961. Tian Liu's real name is Zhong Wen Ling.

¹¹⁰ *ST*, 26 May 1961.

¹¹¹ *ST*, 26 May 1961.

with her hand covering her face.¹¹² At the other end of the road at Delta Circus, a middle-aged man broke through the police cordon and headed towards the fire, shouting, 'I want to see my father! I want to see my father!'.¹¹³ The painful and involuntary separation from one's house and property was particularly felt by elderly residents. Koh Chuan Seng, a fire victim, had to pull his grandfather from the house, since '[m]y grandfather, he came down all the way from China. He wanted to stay inside the house. He says this is my property. "I think I will stay here inside, I will be safe, and my house will be safe, because this is mine"'.¹¹⁴ There was, Tay Ah Chuan remembered, a shop making paper bags from newspapers in the kampong. 'When the fire burned the shop', Tay related, 'the shop owner wanted to jump in but many people grabbed him. His whole fortune was there'.¹¹⁵

Effective crowd control, however, also involuntarily separated fire victim families. Ong Chye Ho was out at work in a sawmill in the Central Area; he rode back hurriedly on a bicycle but was halted at a roadblock at Great World Amusement Park. It was only much later, when he was finally allowed into the fire site, that he found 'everything was gone, everything was flattened'.¹¹⁶ Similarly Tan Geok Hak was working in Sembawang and was informed by her British employer that Beo Lane was on fire. She hurried back in a taxi and, because of the traffic jam, alighted at Great World. She tried to reach Bukit Ho Swee on foot but was unable to gain entry. She was frightened; her husband, a Rediffusion employee, was also out at work and it was 6 pm, and already growing dark. She telephoned her mother-in-law but her three children were not with her. Tan discovered only later that the nanny had taken the children to their grandfather in the Kampong Bugis area.¹¹⁷

The fire victims gradually headed eastwards towards Kim Seng Road, with hundreds soon sheltered in the Havelock Road police station. But at the junction of River Valley Road and Jervois Road, Madam Chua Kim Neo, 31, sat on the roadside sobbing; six of her children, from ages 3 to 12, were missing.¹¹⁸ At 5 pm, there was

¹¹² *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

¹¹³ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

¹¹⁴ RCS, audio programme titled *Then and Now: A Look At Housing*, 16 Sep 1972.

¹¹⁵ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

¹¹⁶ Author's interview with Ong Chye Ho, 14 Feb 2007.

¹¹⁷ Author's interview with Tan Geok Hak, 5 Oct 2006.

¹¹⁸ *ST*, 26 May 1961.



Plate 6.17: A lorry belonging to ‘广源兴’ soy sauce company in Bukit Ho Swee drives away the family’s possessions along Zion Road (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

reportedly a degree of crowd control. ‘A human barrier is formed across a wide area’, with policemen using poles to hold back the crowd.¹¹⁹ Policemen Mohamad Yusoff experienced ‘a lot of havoc’ and heard ‘the screaming’. He found it difficult to distinguish between fire victims and onlookers and ‘sometimes we had to use force to do the crowd control’.¹²⁰ At about 6 pm, British army soldiers from Alexandra Camp and Singapore Military Forces stationed at the Beach Road Camp began to arrive at the main roads, helping the police to enforce law and order. By 8 pm, an effective cordon, comprising 141 police officers and 1,205 policemen and 35 army officers and 600 other ranks, had been formed around the fire zone.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ *ST*, 26 May 1961.

¹²⁰ OHC, interview with Mohamad Yusoff bin Kassim, 23 Apr 1994.

¹²¹ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, p. 1594.

Delta Estate, about 5.30 pm

At 5 pm, the blaze turned northeast and crossed a second main road, Havelock Road. Littered about in this area up to Ganges Avenue were more haphazard collections of highly-flammable materials, as well as a car tyre shop and a battery shop. Upon contact with the flames, the sulfuric acid inside the batteries exploded, producing acrid green smoke with a strong corrosive smell. Two timber yards, two junk shops, two tyre shops, three motor workshops, and one coffee mill in this area were also gutted, while the Delta Branch Office of the Liberal Socialist Party had its back wall burned away. Goh Yong Soo saw the fire approaching his house from the shophouses at Or Kio Tau; his family quickly loaded onto the small pickup his father used for transporting cloth and fled.¹²²

Half an hour later, the fire reached the 2- to 4-storey Singapore Improvement Trust flats at Delta Estate along Ganges Avenue.¹²³ The residents, having seen the flames shift in their direction, had started throwing mattresses and clothes out of their windows and removing beds, tables and other belongings from the flats before moving away from the danger zone. Madam Chua Geok Sim, 37, a housewife, left her house and pushed a sewing machine ahead of her, loaded with clothes with five children tugging at her trousers.¹²⁴ Eva Hamsha (born 1952) and her family stayed at Block 58, a 4-storey SIT block of flats. Her father and their neighbour used a hose to wet the walls of the flats, while Eva and her mother, grandmother and seven children left and walked to their grandmother's house at Farrer Park. But ignoring the fire-fighters' calls for him to leave, her father, Eva recalled, refused and wanted 'to stay put to fend for his house. He said he would come later but he did not come. He thought that he and his neighbour would protect the house'. In the end, the block was not attacked by the flames.¹²⁵

¹²² Author's interview with Goh Yong Soo, 25 Jul 2007.

¹²³ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

¹²⁴ *ST*, 26 May 1961.

¹²⁵ Author's interview with Eva Hamsha, 2 May 2007.



Plate 6.18: The fire has reached Delta Estate. Note the crowd of fire victims and onlookers spilled along Alexandra and Delta roads (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

By 6.30 pm, the blaze was solidly centered around Delta Estate. Here was supposedly ‘a barrier of concrete flats’,¹²⁶ but the rooftops of two blocks of flats and a nearby 3-storey building caught fire within an hour. Fire engines were hastily re-deployed from Si Kah Teng to this new emergent fire front, while army technicians entered the SIT flats to cut off the electricity supply. The great difficulty at Delta Circus, as *Straits Times* journalist Roderick Pestana surmised, was once again the inadequate water supply. Soldiers in desperation resorted to damming the drain at Ganges Avenue with wooden planks and grass and used drain water to fight the flames. Nevertheless, the fire still managed to destroy a portion of the rooftops of the two SIT blocks.¹²⁷ At one point, the flames approached within twenty yards of the Singapore Steam Laundry, threatening the large stores of oil in the factories and warehouses nearby. With the night sky aglow with raging fire, fire-fighters commenced ‘an all-out bid to halt the wall of flames’; at about 10 pm, it was reported that ‘[t]he battle against the fire was fought – and won – near the Delta

¹²⁶ *ST*, 26 May 1961.

¹²⁷ *ST*, 26 May 1961.

Circus'.¹²⁸ Nearly seven hours after the start of the disaster, the fire finally began to be brought under control, or more accurately, had burned itself out against the facades of the SIT blocks.¹²⁹ Thick smoke continued to billow into the sky, obscuring the moonlight. The Havelock Road area had been plunged into complete darkness because the two sub-stations supplying power to the area had been knocked out. Deep into the night, City Council wiremen worked feverishly to repair electrical installations which had been short-circuited by the fire, while fire-fighters extinguished small pockets of flames and continued the damping-down operation until the evening of 28 May.¹³⁰

Arc of Destruction

The Chinese press labelled the Bukit Ho Swee fire 'the unprecedented inferno' ('空前大火'). It was an apt description in terms of the scale of destruction, which carved out an arc of devastation from Si Kah Teng, Beo Lane, Or Kio Tau to Delta Estate. The disaster devastated 2,200 dwellings and a large number of brick and concrete buildings standing on 100 acres of land and destroyed property worth an estimated \$2 million.¹³¹ The number of registered fire victims was 2,833 families totaling 15,694 persons, nearly three times the number in the next largest fire, the 1959 blaze which had ravaged the other side of Tiong Bahru Road. The 1961 fire victim population was a young one, comprising 7,816 persons 15 years and above and 7,878 persons under 15, many of whom had escaped only with the clothes on their back.¹³² Most of the homeless had not purchased fire insurance, which was beyond the means of a low-income population.¹³³ Many school-going fire victims did not attend class the following day: at Delta East School, for instance, the attendance was only 88 out of 645 pupils for the morning session and 209 out of 647 pupils for the afternoon session, while there were only 327 out of 620 pupils for the

¹²⁸ *ST*, 26 May 1961.

¹²⁹ The Fire Brigade sent a 'Stop Message' to Fire Control at 8.20 pm. FD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 7.

¹³⁰ FD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 7.

¹³¹ *ST*, 26 May 1961. The *Nanyang Siang Pau* estimated the damage to be \$10 million. *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

¹³² *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, pp. 1565, 1605.

¹³³ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

morning session at Havelock Road School.¹³⁴ Of the 805 pupils of Kai Kok Public School, 526 were fire victims.¹³⁵ Although some of the houses and shops had been insured, many were not.¹³⁶ An elderly owner of a medical hall gutted by the blaze, which had previously been insured but not at the time of the fire, estimated his losses to be \$6-7,000.¹³⁷ Littered throughout the fire site were the charred carcasses of pigs, poultry, cats, and dogs, the putrid odour of which filled the area with a sickening stench.¹³⁸ Among the ashes and carcasses, the kampong economy also lay in ruins. However, some livestock had been saved, causing journalists to wonder if ‘among the fire victims, some had apparently lost their minds’, ‘emerging from the fire site with their pigs, chickens and ducks’.¹³⁹



Plate 6.19: Safe from the fire but heart-broken (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

¹³⁴ ME 2213/61, Memo from Principal, Delta East School, to Director of Education, MOE, 27 May 1961; and Un-Authored Memo titled ‘Kampong Ho Swee Fire’, 26 May 1961.

¹³⁵ ME 913/57, Memo titled ‘Kai Kok School’ by Chin Boon Kwong, MOE, 13 Jun 1961.

¹³⁶ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

¹³⁷ *NYSP*, 27 May 1961.

¹³⁸ SBC, audio-visual programme titled *Diary of a Nation: Bukit Ho Swee Fire, 25 May 1961*, broadcast on 25 May 1988.

¹³⁹ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

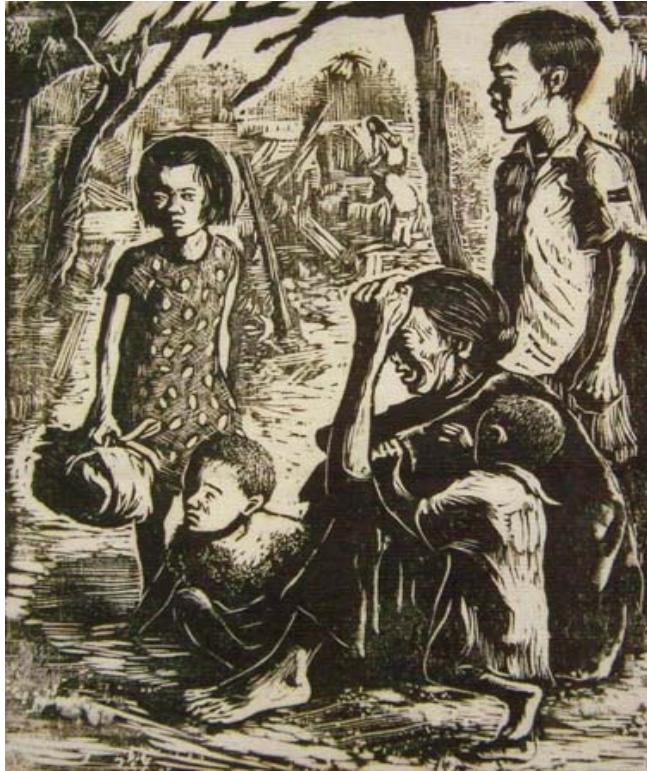


Plate 6.20: The Bukit Ho Swee fire in the public imagination. The disaster was the subject in the works of several social-minded artists in the 1960s. Here, Koeh Sia Yong depicts a family's grief in '失去家园' ('Lost Homes'). The son is wearing a mourning band on his arm, indicating that his father, and probably the family's main breadwinner, has recently passed away. Koeh saw the towering cloud of black smoke from his house in Hougang. He went to see the fire site afterwards. Author's interview with Koeh Sia Yong, 15 Mar 2007.



Plate 6.21: Artist Liu Kang's painting, titled 'After the Fire', on the sorrow of Chinese families who had lost their homes in the inferno (Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore).

There were only four reported fatalities in the disaster. The first alleged death from the fire was Kee Hock Lian, a 50-year-old Chinese man formerly residing at 253 Tiong Bahru Road, who was brought to the General Hospital at about 3.40 pm but died shortly after. Further medical investigation, the *Sin Chew Jit Poh* warned, was necessary to establish the exact cause of death.¹⁴⁰ It turned out that Kee had died of heart failure shortly before the fire occurred and had been ill for 6-7 months.¹⁴¹

The first confirmed fatality was a young Chinese man named Lim Tong Seng, 27, whose remains were found at 25-D Bukit Ho Swee, about fifty yards from the Boon Tiong Road flats, on 27 May.¹⁴² Lim had been mentally ill for more than ten years and had received treatment at Woodbridge Hospital. He had studied at Kai Kok School and had worked for a few months as a compositor at the *Nanyang Siang Pau*, a job he had to leave as his illness progressed.¹⁴³ According to Lim's third brother, who discovered his remains upon returning to their former house to look for him, the family had locked Lim up in his room as he could occasionally become violent. When the fire broke out, his father, a lorry driver, was at work while his mother had gone to visit a friend. The second brother had the presence of mind to unlock Lim's room but the family had concentrated on helping their aged grandmother, 77, who had to be carried away. Someone, according to the *Nanyang Siang Pau*, had seen Lim 'run out from the house but when he saw the great fire burning outside, he laughed out loudly. Then he ran back into his house'.¹⁴⁴ The *Straits Times*, however, reported the younger brother as stating that when the fire was approaching, his sister had tried to drag Lim out of their home but he had struggled. As the flames reached the house, the sister dashed out and turned round to see it ablaze.¹⁴⁵ Ironically, Lim had been born just after the 1934 Bukit Ho Swee fire.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁴¹ Coroner's Court, Master Record Book, View No. 329 Kee Hock Lian, 26 May 1961; *SFP*, 27 May 1961. The Coroner gave a 'natural causes' verdict.

¹⁴² Coroner's Court, Master Record Book, Inquest No. 346 Lim Tong Seng, 27 May 1961; FD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 3.

¹⁴³ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁴⁴ *NYSP*, 28 May 1961.

¹⁴⁵ *ST*, 27 May 1961.

¹⁴⁶ *NYSP*, 28 May 1961.

The second death was an unidentified elderly Chinese female, whose charred body was discovered on the same day at 23 Bukit Ho Swee in a wooden house about a hundred yards from where Lim's body had been discovered.¹⁴⁷ According to a neighbour of the deceased, she was already in her 70s and was staying with a relative. Her eyesight was poor and she was nearly blind. She had also been ill for long periods and had been bed-ridden. In the confusion caused by the fire, it seemed, the neighbours had assumed that someone had taken the old lady to safety and had concentrated all their efforts on helping the young children.¹⁴⁸ The third fatality was Ong Chee Chai, an elderly Chinese man aged 70, who had lived at 13-B Bukit Ho Swee.¹⁴⁹ Ong's body was discovered by his son, who had returned on the 29th to look for the family's belongings. It appeared that Ong did not manage to escape in time and was burned to death inside his own house.¹⁵⁰ The final body found was another Chinese man, Gan Khek Seng, also aged 70, whose remains were discovered much later – in mid-June – at 612 Havelock Road.¹⁵¹ The small number of fatalities was testament to the ability of the vast majority of fire victims, however much they were possessed by panic, to both sound the alarm and find their way through the small lanes of the kampong to safety at the main roads.

Teams from St. John's Ambulance and the Red Cross tended to the injured on-site. The number of registered casualties who sought treatment at the General Hospital was about 85.¹⁵² Among them were elderly people, children, women, and fire-fighters who had suffered burns, fallen down in the confusion, inhaled smoke, fainted in the crush of bodies, or had been hurt by objects. One fire-fighter had accidentally inhaled the corrosive fumes produced by burning sulfuric acid in a

¹⁴⁷ Coroner's Court, Master Record Book, Inquest No. 349 unnamed, 28 May 1961. The remains were discovered by a Tan Boon Ann and an 'open' verdict was ruled. The Fire Brigade reports the address as identical to Lim Tong Siew's – 25-D Bukit Ho Swee but this was clearly an error. FD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁸ NYSP, 28 May 1961.

¹⁴⁹ Coroner's Court, Master Record Book, Inquest No. 351 Ong Chee Chai, 30 May 1961; FD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ NYSP, 30 May 1961.

¹⁵¹ Coroner's Court, Master Record Book, Inquest No. 412 Gan Khek Seng, 15 Jun 1961; FD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 3. The Coroner ruled the cause of death as 'unascertainable' but gave a 'misadventure' verdict. The other fatalities attributed to the fire were also given 'misadventure' verdicts.

¹⁵² FD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 7. The Chinese newspapers reported the number of registered casualties at 40-45. NYSP, 26 May 1961 and SCJP, 26 May 1961.

battery shop and fainted.¹⁵³ Most of the casualties suffered relatively light injuries and were treated as outpatients, except for a 60-year-old Chinese man, a 11-year-old girl and a 1½-year-old toddler, who had more serious injuries and were hospitalised for further treatment, but they were not considered to be in serious danger.¹⁵⁴

Five hours before the fire had been brought under control, a semblance of law and order had been established on the main roads by the police and military.¹⁵⁵ But incidents of theft, robbery and looting had been reported throughout the day, as opportunists took full advantage of the mayhem to pilfer the contents of vacated houses or the piles of salvaged items dumped on unguarded open ground.¹⁵⁶ At about 3.30 pm, a man staying in Si Kah Teng, whose house was burned down, had already lost a leather case, in which he had kept the family's valuables and which he had placed outside his house.¹⁵⁷ Similarly, Roy Chan was watching a Brazilian circus performance at Great World Amusement Park when he noticed a giant cloud of smoke at Havelock Road. When his friend warned him that his house might be on fire, Chan's first thought was, 'Don't anyhow say. It cannot be, the smoke is so far'. He nevertheless went back to his house at 585 Havelock Road, taking a shortcut through the wooden houses of Hong Lim Pa Sat, to find his house still standing but vacated and locked. He forced his way into the house, whereupon a large crowd of '50-60' strangers entered the house and, over his protests, began to ransack his home. 'These people', Chan maintained, 'were curious onlookers. If one started taking something, the others followed suit. Everybody copycat, all stealing things'. He lost his watch and stamp collection and the family's porcelain and jewellery, but the greatest loss for his mother was her monthly expenses of \$300. There was one fire engine standing outside his house, with a single driver but no fire-fighters or

¹⁵³ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁵⁴ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁵⁵ 'Profiteers' and looters had long been observed at the sites of Singapore's postwar fires. The police warned in 1958 that 'secret society men and petty thieves are usually the first to reach the scene of a fire. They would pose as voluntary workers to enter the homes'. In the four fires in the city in the last three months, at Bencoolen Street, Kampong Silat, Jalan Ampas, and Koo Chye, thugs had made off with more than \$10,000 in loot. 'The gangsters', according to the police, 'are clever people. Knowing that the police and the fire brigade take some time to get to the scene, they make a rush for their loot and then escape before we arrive'. It had apparently been easy for the thugs to enter homes and shops during a fire when most residents were too excited or frightened to notice. *SFP*, 12 Apr 1958.

¹⁵⁶ Author's interview with Tay Yan Woon, 28 Sep 2006.

¹⁵⁷ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

policemen. Chan eventually found his family at Delta-Ganges Community Centre, and was berated for opening the doors to the looters.¹⁵⁸

At nightfall, Pang Ming Toh and his family returned to their barber shop along Tiong Bahru Road. All around were the burned out ruins and ashes of former buildings. They could still feel the heat emanating from their shop – it ‘was 轰轰的’ [‘hot’] and even the walls were hot. Afraid that the walls and ceiling would collapse and crush them, the family waited out the night outside the shop.¹⁵⁹

Besides its scale, the Bukit Ho Swee inferno was also unprecedented in being the first massive fire which confronted the People’s Action Party government, only elected to power less than two years earlier. Throughout the afternoon of the 25th, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and the police made frequent radio broadcasts urging fire victims not to panic, to stay clear of the roads to prevent obstructing the fire-fighters, and to report to designated relief centres.¹⁶⁰ Following the abandonment of the original relief centre at Delta-Ganges Community Centre, a permanent relief centre was established at Kim Seng Road at 4.30 pm, while temporary centres were set up at Seng Poh Road Chinese School and Tiong Bahru English Primary School for fire victims from the Tiong Bahru area. Between 6-8 pm, for instance, about 300 fire victims arrived at Tiong Bahru School.¹⁶¹ At about 6 pm, the health services, Red Cross and St. John’s Ambulance moved into the Kim Seng relief centre.¹⁶² At 8 pm, Lee Kuan Yew arrived at Delta Circus in a Police Land Rover. He toured the fire site before departing to visit the Delta and Kim Seng relief centres. Mobbed by distraught fire victims who had been separated from their children, he asked them not to worry excessively, assuring them that the children would be found and brought to the relief centres. He suggested that they patiently wait until the following day to report the missing children to the Social Welfare Department.¹⁶³ On the same day, almost the entire cabinet and other key PAP officials like Chan

¹⁵⁸ Author’s interview with Roy Chan, 7 Mar 2007.

¹⁵⁹ Author’s interview with Pang Ming Toh, 2 Nov 2006.

¹⁶⁰ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁶¹ ME 2213/61, Memo from Principal, Tiong Bahru English Primary School, to Inspector of Schools, 27 May 1961.

¹⁶² *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, pp. 1599-1600.

¹⁶³ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

Choy Siong, Assemblywoman for Delta, visited the fire site and helped fire victims move their belongings away from the fire. At 7.30 pm, Chan and her partner, Ong Pang Boon, Minister for National Development, arrived at the Kim Seng relief centre to supervise the relief operations, while K. M. Byrne, Minister for Labour and Law, looked after the Seng Poh School relief centre.¹⁶⁴ An organised relief effort on the spot began to take shape.

¹⁶⁴ Including the Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye, Minister of Culture S. Rajaratnam, Minister for Labour and Law K. M. Byrne, Finance Minister Goh Keng Swee, Minister of the Interior Ong Pang Boon, Minister for National Development Tan Kia Gan, and Assemblyman for Tiong Bahru Lee Teck Him. *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

Chapter 7

State of Emergency

Out of the devastation and pandemonium on the day of the inferno emerged a massive effort by the People's Action Party government to remake a shattered Bukit Ho Swee community. The rehabilitation and emergency housing of the fire victims commenced on the very night of the fire and culminated in the successful completion of a public housing estate on the fire site just nine months later. The relief work constituted part of a PAP campaign, conducted within a national state of emergency occasioned by the calamity. It aimed to rapidly rehouse the fire victims in public housing built on the fire site and transform a burned-out area of 'Old Singapore' as an icon of modernity. This chapter examines the crucial initial stage of the relief operation from the provision of shelter and food at the disaster relief centre to the fire victims' relocation in temporary Housing and Development Board flats within the space of several months. The relief work was driven by both historical expedients and new political forces: the PAP had inherited the colonial policy and practice of fire relief developed from the kampong blazes of the 1950s. However, the party also possessed a greater determination to push through its social welfare programmes more quickly and with less tolerance for political and social opposition than the British colonial regime countenanced. Yet, as this chapter reveals, many fire victims also responded vigorously to two contentious issues arising from the Bukit Ho Swee fire: the economic costs of the new public housing and the actual cause of the fire. The resistance to the social changes being imposed from above threatened to unhinge the relief operation.

Fire Site

Comprehensive control of the fire site was integral to the government's plan to build a modern housing estate upon the blackened ashes of Bukit Ho Swee and prevent the emergence of another settlement of unauthorised wooden housing. Tan Kia Gan, who had replaced Ong Eng Guan as Minister for National Development, blamed the fire on the unauthorised buildings built by 'unscrupulous racketeers who

live off the miseries of the poor'; he announced later that he had ordered the Chief Building Surveyor to demolish any unauthorised buildings as soon as they were spotted.¹ As the fire burned itself out at Delta Estate on the night of 25 May, more than 1,500 policemen, Singapore Military Forces soldiers and steel-helmeted Gurkhas with fixed bayonets maintained a cordon around the fire site.² On the following morning, with dark clouds of smoke still overhanging the area, armed police and soldiers established checkpoints at the entrances of Beo Lane and at other strategic entry points into the fire site. They scrutinised the identification cards of fire victims standing in long queues to prevent unauthorised access into the area. Even so, former residents who knew the kampong's geography well could still bypass the checkpoints and find their own way into the blackened site.³ Granted official access to their former homes, other fire victims searched for their belongings beneath burnt sheets of zinc under the watchful eyes of policemen and soldiers, while detectives patrolled the area to prevent looting.⁴ The Police Commissioner, A. E. G. Blades, toured the fire site the morning after the fire. Two men who entered without authorisation, reportedly 'out of curiosity', were arrested and fined \$10 each.⁵ Nonetheless, incidents of looting occurred at the fire site. On 29 May, cash and cigarettes were stolen from a coffeeshop which had escaped destruction.⁶ Three days later, in two separate cases of theft, a sewing machine, and jewellery and cash were also stolen.⁷ In subsequent months, the HDB patrolled the site to prevent the rebuilding of unauthorised housing and demolished half-burnt buildings.⁸

For some fire victims, returning to their former homes was rewarded with the recovery of pots, sewing machines, pans, basins, dishes, and even money and jewellery. One family retrieved thousands of dollars hidden in jars buried in the ground.⁹ For some, the recovered items were not merely tangible material assets but also signified the social glue required to rebuild personal and family lives. When

¹ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, pp. 1567-68.

² *ST*, 27 May 1961.

³ Author's interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007.

⁴ *SFP*, 26 May 1961.

⁵ *SFP*, 28 Jun 1961.

⁶ *ST*, 29 May 1961.

⁷ *ST*, 1 Jun 1961.

⁸ HB 993/50 Vol. III, Assistant Lands Officer's Report, May 1961.

⁹ *SFP*, 26 May 1961.



Plate 7.1: Fire victims search through the debris at the fire site (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 7.2: Families with buckets search in the charred ruins. A girl walks away with a bucket of what she has salvaged. Two bulldozers stand ready in the background (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

Tan Geok Hak's family returned to their former house in Beo Lane, they searched for and found their sewing machine. Tan repaired it for \$200. 'After that', she explained, 'it was OK, and I'm still using it. It had been charred. It is a Singer [an

American brand of sewing machine], not the normal Japanese brand, that was no good. Mine is a Singer'. The repair of the sewing machine, an important family asset in the 1950s, at a cost equal to the monthly salary of a low-income worker, heralded the reconstruction of Tan's family life.¹⁰



Plate 7.3: Tan Geok Hak's Singer sewing machine, still being used, in her flat in Bukit Ho Swee, 2006 (Photograph by author).

Nevertheless, in other cases, what little was salvaged from the ashes merely underscored the enormity of the personal loss. Goh Sin Tub, Deputy Director of the Social Welfare Department, recalled,

It's strange what people rush to save from fires – an old broken-down sewing machine looking more like junk, old kitchen pots and dented pans and (would you believe it?) a chamber-pot! Here I saw a child clutching her dirty plastic doll and there a man with a battered suitcase filled with rags and old shoes. Others were just as pathetic: a lady with a stack of patchwork blankets; an old man naked to the waist seated with a protective hand on a faded picture of an ancestral-

¹⁰ Author's interview with Tan Geok Hak, 5 Oct 2006.

looking old lady; some ladies with mysterious cloth bundles, big and small; a boy with a stack of school books and some comics.¹¹

For instance, a middle-aged sailor retrieved a few burnt washbasins and metal buckets near his former house. As he was at work during the fire, only his wife and children had been at home and had not taken along their savings when they fled.¹² An elderly man, about 70, also returned to the site of his medical shop. There, poking at the charred earth with a blackened stick, he managed to recover some medicine containers in relatively good condition. But the mainstay of his life, the shop itself which he had owned for decades, had been completely destroyed. It had once been insured but the insurance company had later refused to offer insurance. He estimated his losses to be about \$6,000-7,000.¹³

A Maelstrom of Activity at the Relief Centre

To the northeast of the fire site was the relief centre, the second and by far the most important arena of official regulation. Lee Kuan Yew stated that the government's responsibility was to provide the fire victims with water, food and clothing, and at the same time help them find new homes.¹⁴ The government's first efforts to organise a proper venue where the fire victims could be sheltered, fed and registered were tentative. The SWD had originally estimated the number of fire victims at only 6,000.¹⁵ On the night of the fire, about 2,200 fire victims had sought shelter at the five schools along Kim Seng Road which had been designated as the main relief centre: Kim Seng East (English), Kim Seng West (Integrated), River Valley Government Chinese Middle, River Valley Primary (Chinese), and River Valley Primary (English).¹⁶ At about 8.30 pm, fire victims had begun streaming into the classrooms of the River Valley English School, which the principal and his staff

¹¹ Goh Sin Tub, 'The Bukit Ho Swee Fire', *Goh's 12 Best Singapore Stories* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1993), p. 161.

¹² *NYSP*, 27 May 1961.

¹³ *NYSP*, 27 May 1961.

¹⁴ RCS, audio programme titled *Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's Speech On Bukit Ho Swee Fire*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁵ *SFP*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁶ Classes for the schools' students were held provisionally at Havelock and Delta schools.

had hurriedly prepared for occupation.¹⁷ Another 1,070 persons moved into the Seng Poh School and Tiong Bahru School temporary relief centres.¹⁸ At about 11 pm, after the fire was brought under control, fire victims and their relatives housed at the Delta-Ganges Community Centre were told that the SWD would transfer them to the Kim Seng relief centre, where they would be registered and fed. However, there were still about 13,000 unaccounted fire victims who stayed with relatives and friends or went elsewhere on the night of the fire. Beh Poh Suan, who lacked supportive friends and relatives before the fire, spent the night out in the open. As she starkly put it, 'I just took my child and his milk powder and we went to sleep at Ma Kau Thiong. We slept with the dead'. The unfortunate pair were brought to the Kim Seng relief centre the following day.¹⁹ The next morning, army trucks transferred the fire victims from the temporary school centres and Delta-Ganges Community Centre to the Kim Seng centre. On the same morning, the SWD's Public Assistance Section handed out \$10 relief payments, clothing and household utensils to 10,261 fire victims.²⁰

Within a week, the number of fire victims at the centre grew to more than 8,000, over half of the total number of homeless. This meant, however, that a large minority were still able to obtain temporary accommodation with relatives and friends or, in rare cases, find a new house. Lim You Meng's family, for instance, sought shelter in their uncle's coffeeshop in the Or Kio Tau shophouse on the night of the fire. Once the fire site was sealed off, they moved into an attap house near the Tiong Bahru sewerage works, where they stayed for the next several months.²¹ Similarly, Sim Kim Boey and her sister-in-law moved further away into a friend's house at Hougang,²² while Tan Tiam Ho's family moved in temporarily with a friend, going to the relief centre only to register as fire victims in order to be eligible for relief assistance.²³

¹⁷ ME 2213/61, Memo from Principal, River Valley English School, to Director of Education, MOE, 31 May 1961.

¹⁸ *SFP*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁹ Author's interview with Beh Poh Suan, 14 Feb 2007.

²⁰ SWD 81/61 Vol. I, Minutes of Meeting of the Bukit Ho Swee Fire National Relief Fund Committee, 27 May 1961.

²¹ Author's interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

²² Author's interview with Sim Kim Boey, 14 Feb 2007.

²³ Author's interview with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007.

‘A maelstrom of activity’ quickly engulfed the relief centre.²⁴ Throughout the 26th, the authorities worked feverishly around the clock to organise the schools as emergency camps. The SWD was at the forefront of this massive operation and would later hail it as ‘the greatest challenge ever to be met in its fifteen-year-old span of existence’.²⁵ W. S. Woon assured the fire victims that it was only a matter of time before the Department got organised.²⁶ But communications between government departments at times broke down and threatened to derail the unfolding organisational work. At River Valley Middle School, which had not originally been designated as one of the schools for the relief operation, students turned up for class in the morning and had to be dismissed. The fire victims arrived at the school shortly afterwards at 9 am but had to queue ‘4-5 deep’ for several hours before being properly registered by SWD officials and teachers from the schools. The fire victims became so frustrated by the long wait that teachers trying to control the crowd were abused and threatened in the process. It was only at 4 pm that the police were able to take over the crowd control duties.²⁷

The classrooms in the 3- and 4-storey buildings in the five schools were hurriedly converted into living quarters. Every room soon became congested with a family occupying each corner, sleeping on mattresses and surrounded by possessions salvaged from the fire piled up on the floor. Infants slept on chairs which parents had improvised into makeshift beds. Besides the fire victims, there was also the odd unexpected resident; Tay Yan Woon, for instance, had saved her family’s ducks from the fire and brought them to the centre. There, she reared them for a few days before a relative took them away.²⁸ As the number of fire victims rose in the course of the following days, families spilled out into the corridors and jammed the staircases of the school buildings. To ease the congestion, the British Army set up twenty tents in the open school compounds on 29 May. The tents, ringed by barbed wire, provided accommodation for 600 persons but living in the open subjected the tent dwellers to the unrelenting heat of the sun. Ong Chye Ho, who lived in such a

²⁴ OHC, interview with Goh Sin Tub, 12 Oct 1993.

²⁵ SWD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 1.

²⁶ *ST*, 27 May 1961.

²⁷ ME 2213/61, Memo from Principal, River Valley Government Chinese Middle School, to Chief Inspector of Schools, MOE, 26 May 1961; and Memo from Principal, River Valley Government Chinese Middle School, to Chief Inspector of Schools, MOE, 27 May 1961.

²⁸ Author’s interview with Tay Yan Woon, 28 Sep 2006.

tent, found that it was hot and impossible to sleep, and people frequently watered the canvas to keep the tent cool.²⁹ Many fire victims soon left the stifling confines of the classrooms and tents in droves for the somewhat cooler corridors and staircases of the buildings, leaning against or sitting on the parapets, or resting in grassy areas around the buildings which were under shade.



Plate 7.4: Fire victims at the relief centre (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

The organisation and establishment of the relief centre, as HDB architect Alan Choe later observed, ‘tested the whole machinery of the government in action’.³⁰ When the PAP government was first elected to power, its relationship with the civil service had been strained by its strident anti-colonial posture, which briefly resulted in a pay-cut for civil servants in June 1959. By the time of the fire, however, with the expulsion of the populist Ong Eng Guan from the government, the PAP had largely obtained the cooperation of the bureaucracy. As Goh Sin Tub explained, the civil service was modeled on the British ministerial system and trained to be loyal to the government of the day, while the PAP leaders were also considered honest and dedicated, the very qualities which the civil service upheld.³¹

²⁹ Author’s interview with Ong Chye Ho, 14 Feb 2007.

³⁰ OHC, interview with Alan Choe, 1 Jul 1997.

³¹ OHC, interview with Goh Sin Tub, 12 Oct 1993. The civil service also supported the PAP government because of the rapid Malayanisation of the service and the creation of a Political Study Centre in 1959 to obtain the support of the civil servants for the government’s policies. Singapore, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 14.

The civil and military services consequently cooperated with the government and played crucial roles in assisting the relief operation, putting into practice the valuable experience they had gained from previous kampong fires. The British Army supplied 8,000 blankets and 6,000 mattresses for the fire victims. Its Catering Corps initially prepared the large quantities of food and drinks required before the SWD took over the kitchens the following day. On the 26th, the Gas Department installed gas burners for the central kitchen in the centre, while the Work Brigade, an organisation established by the PAP in 1960 to provide some form of work for unemployed school-leavers, helped to cook and distribute three meals a day. Lunch and dinner consisted of rice with chicken, duck, pork or fish (mutton proved unpopular), with porridge, coffee and biscuits served for breakfast. Three British Army trailers initially supplied the water for the centre but on 28 May, Water Department engineers completed a new pipeline extension at Kim Seng Road to increase the water supply to the centre and installed more than ten additional standpipes.³² This engineering achievement contrasted sharply with the government's failure to provide sufficient water to the kampong before the inferno and highlighted which situation the authorities really regarded as a genuine emergency. Women regularly gathered at the standpipes, collecting water, bathing their children and doing their laundry. The children, as they had previously done in the kampong, stood in long queues with the adults and collected water, food and drinks for their families. Mobile toilets, temporary bathrooms and a milk feeding unit for infants were also set up.

Compared to the earlier efforts of the British colonial regime and Labour Front governments, however, the PAP leadership also possessed new means of mobilising a relief effort on a nation-wide scale. On 1 June, army trucks brought to the relief centre hundreds of bundles of clothing donated to the fire victims, which had been sorted by volunteers at the People's Association (PA). The PA also organised entertainment at the Tiong Bahru and Delta-Ganges community centres. The association was a statutory body established by the PAP government in July 1960 to engage the grassroots, particularly the rural population, and managed the

³² *ST*, 27-29 May 1961; *SFP*, 27-29 May 1961.



Plate 7.5: Boys and girls bathe at the standpipes installed in the relief centre, while women wash their laundry nearby (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 7.6: A British army blanket, held by Jack Chia, still in the possession of Tan Geok Hak, 2006 (Photograph by author).

community centres. The PA, most importantly, had mobilised volunteers for the relief work through the community centres. My father, then a worker in a transport company, was approached by neighbours involved in the PA activities of the Delta-Ganges Community Centre to offer his services as a volunteer. He stopped work for

two days to go to the centre, wearing a red armband for identification, and distributed milk for the babies and blankets for the fire victims.³³

The relief centre, like the fire site, was closely regulated, with police and soldiers manning the gates to prevent unauthorised entry. Initially, relatives and friends of the fire victims had freedom of entry but on 27 May, visits were limited to between 4 and 6 pm, so as not to interfere with the SWD's work and to prevent people from cashing in and depriving the fire victims of food and the use of the amenities.³⁴ On 30 May, the SWD started two rosters: one for duty officers to manage the centre from 8 am to 10 pm daily and another 24-hour roster for officers to supervise the individual school buildings.³⁵ Loudspeakers were installed in the centre and broadcast continuously in English, Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew over the cries of infants and the general bustle, helping families to locate missing children and relaying official messages to the fire victims.³⁶



Plate 7.7: Controlled entry. Relatives and friends wait in queue at the gate of the relief centre while the fire victims wait within the school compounds (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

³³ Author's interview with Loh Tian Ho, 13 Jan 2006.

³⁴ *ST*, 27 May 1961.

³⁵ SWD 78A/61, Duty Roster for Fire at Bukit Ho Swee, 30 May 1961.

³⁶ ME 2213/61, School Report by Principal, Kim Seng West School, 31 May 1961.

Registration, as an instrument of social control, was a crucial component of the relief work. Goh Sin Tub stated that '[t]he first big job was to register the victims for distribution of money, goods etc., providing them with an identification card'.³⁷ SWD staff did much of the registration work. On 2 and 3 June, they were assisted by 126 teachers from the five designated schools who were mobilised to register the fire victims for duplicates of identity cards and citizenship certificates lost in the fire.³⁸ Fire victims who had found accommodation with relatives and friends were also urged to register with the SWD in order to collect relief payments. By the end of the day on 26 May, more than half of the total number of fire victims had been registered.³⁹ The registration work also sought to remove accidental 'duplicate' and 'fake' cases.⁴⁰ As Roy Chan explained,

Some fire victims, they were so daring. They registered as fire victims to claim compensation. A lot claimed their identity cards were lost and used our house number as their address. If they were thoroughly checked, they were not fire victims. Some had been moved out of the area for a few years, not only Bukit Ho Swee but also Tiong Bahru. Most fire victims were temporarily housed at Kim Seng, and so before some of them moved there themselves, they claimed they were staying with relatives and friends. So they used their relatives' and friends' address, say, OK, if there's any compensation, the letter will come to them and they will go to Kim Seng and queue up to collect the money.⁴¹

Registration and fraudulent behaviour consequently posed a daunting administrative challenge. Walter Kwek from the SWD's Public Assistance Section had been out fishing on the day of the fire when he was recalled, while his colleague Alan Choo was notified by a policeman at his Tanglin Halt home. Kwek and Choo reported for work the next day at the relief centre to register the fire victims for cash

³⁷ *ST*, 6 Aug 1963.

³⁸ ME 2213/61, Report on the Use of School Staff by the Ministry of Home Affairs, 2 Jun 1961.

³⁹ SWD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 1.

⁴⁰ *ST*, 6 Jun 1961.

⁴¹ Author's interview with Roy Chan, 2 Apr 2007.



Plate 7.8: Registration at the relief centre. Note the absence of official papers produced by the fire victims, showing that the registration relied chiefly on verbal statements (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

payments and worked there for two days. Both felt that the relief work was not well-organised, as Kwek explained,

Payment, sometimes you just got to take their word for it. If they said they had lost their ICs [identification cards], you just took their word for it. Because at that moment, all was chaos. There were frauds: they were relatives living somewhere else, not staying there but they said they were staying there. They registered not for the money but because they wanted to get the housing flats, so they would get priority. But sometimes it was double registration, not intentional. The husband would register, the wife would register, the son would register, then you got three registrations for one family. We resolved it very fast because we had the registration cards and their addresses were in the cards.⁴²

Another key aspect of the rehabilitation work was a concerted official effort to keep the relief centre clean. Health workers regularly sprayed disinfectant and

⁴² Author's interviews with Walter Kwek, 25 Jul 2007, and Alan Choo, 25 Jul 2007. Interestingly, one of their SWD colleagues was a fire victim who lost his belongings in the fire. According to Kwek, the Department was so preoccupied with the relief work that they did not collect any money for him, who did not take leave but worked at the relief centre with his colleagues.

insecticide and carried out fumigation, syringe fogging and other mosquito and fly control measures. The Ministry of Culture, in reflecting on the health measures, stated, 'Whatever setbacks occur, Singaporeans must always be clean. The first impulse is to wash away everything, wash away the sorrows and start afresh'.⁴³ The health concerns, the authorities emphasised, also mandated a need for speed in the rehousing of the fire victims. Fears were voiced of a possible epidemic breaking out in the congested living conditions of the relief centre with the discovery of eleven cases of measles and dysentery, and the fact that most of the children had not been inoculated against diphtheria, whooping cough or smallpox. Ahmad Ibrahim, the Minister for Health, urged the rapid relocation of the fire victims to HDB flats, since the five schools were designed to accommodate only 600 students each but were presently housing over 8,000 fire victims, nearly triple the intended capacity. Speaking in the language of the same pejorative discourse of overcrowding and filth previously deployed by the British colonial regime, Ibrahim warned, 'This is a condition of extreme overcrowding and provides ideal circumstances for the spread of serious upper respiratory infection such as diphtheria, influenza, poliomyelitis, pharyngitis, whooping cough and the like'.⁴⁴ On 1 June, Lee Kuan Yew told the fire victims that they had to be rehoused as soon as possible as '[t]he hygiene situation is a little dangerous'.⁴⁵ Such fearful apprehensions had some basis. At River Valley Middle School, for instance, the sewerage system and drainage were found to be choked, while the whole school was in 'a deplorably untidy condition – caused by thrown food stuff and night-soil'.⁴⁶ Likewise, Yong Nyuk Lin, the Minister for Education, wanted the fire victims to leave the relief centre as soon as possible to enable over 7,000 students of the schools to resume their studies and prepare for their year-end examinations. This expressed concern was due to representations from the school principals, who in particular wanted over 2,000 graduating students to resume lessons in order to prepare for their respective examinations.⁴⁷

⁴³ MC, audio-visual programme titled *The People's Singapore: Fire Relief*, broadcast in the 1960s, exact date unknown.

⁴⁴ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, pp. 1598-99.

⁴⁵ RCS, audio programme titled *Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's Speech To Bukit Ho Swee Fire Victims*, 1 Jun 1961.

⁴⁶ ME 2213/61, Memo from Principal, River Valley Government Chinese Middle School, to Chief Inspector of Schools, MOE, 26 May 1961.

⁴⁷ ME 2213/61, Memo from Acting Chief Inspector of Schools to Minister for Education, 30 May 1961; RCS, audio recording titled *Speeches On Bukit Ho Swee's Fire By Ministers*, 1 Jun 1961.

The relief centre, as a strictly regulated confined area, also enabled the government to make personal contact with previous residents of a 'black area' which had largely been outside official regulation. The Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State) Yusof Ishak, Lee Kuan Yew and his fellow ministers, and Chan Choy Siong, Assemblywoman for Delta, regularly visited the centre.⁴⁸ On the 26th, Lee consoled a middle-aged lady, with a five-year-old boy, who said tearfully, 'This is my youngest child. There are still more than ten others, I don't know where they are'. He replied, 'They shouldn't be lost but there are too many people here now so it can't be helped. I believe they will be found tomorrow'.⁴⁹ Lee also comforted Malay fire victims who felt doubly unfortunate to have lost their possessions on Hari Raya Haji. Lee explained to them that the fire was an accident and quoted the Chinese saying that it was 'ten thousand fortune' that no one had been hurt. He added that if they were willing to work hard, they would soon be able to rebuild their homes.⁵⁰ On 27-28 May, Lee also consoled other fire victims, inspected the social and medical services and was satisfied that the preparation of milk for the infants was hygienic.⁵¹ On the 28th, Lee had asked a young man, whose parents had passed away and who had more than ten brothers and sisters, haltingly in colloquial Hokkien, '吃什么头路?' ['What is your livelihood?'] The man's belongings had all been lost but Lee assured him, saying, 'As long as we are alive, there is a way out, right?' To an old lady, who had eight family members, including six children, and whose belongings were also destroyed, Lee said, 'Never mind, we'll find a way to help you'. The Prime Minister also met a male Middle 4 student, about 15, from Kai Kok Public School, whose family of four had also lost all their belongings. The boy said he was a little sad that his school had burned down, to which Lee replied, 'Never mind. The people of Singapore are wholly helping you. You are not alone'.⁵²

⁴⁸ Chan Choy Siong and her partner, Ong Pang Boon, married on 29 May but she returned immediately to her work at the relief centre.

⁴⁹ *SCJP*, 26 May 1961.

⁵⁰ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

⁵¹ RCS, audio programme titled *Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew Tours Tiong Bahru After Bukit Ho Swee Fire*, broadcast on 28 May 1961.

⁵² RCS, audio programme titled *Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew Tours Tiong Bahru After Bukit Ho Swee Fire*, broadcast on 28 May 1961.

The PAP government took upon itself the responsibility for rehabilitating the homeless by establishing a Bukit Ho Swee Fire National Relief Fund (BHSFNRF) on the very night of the fire. This measure signalled its intent to mobilise the nation and conduct the relief work on a country-wide basis. The Fund was managed by a National Committee chaired by K. M. Byrne, the Minister for Labour and Law, with W. S. Woon appointed as the Secretary-cum-Treasurer. Its aim was to 'raise funds for the relief and rehabilitation of the fire victims on a national basis'.⁵³ The committee's composition was significant in projecting an image of national unity by including representatives from the political parties, trade unions, chambers of commerce, newspapers, people's associations, student unions, hawkers' associations, and the leftwing rural associations. Its formation was also telling because, as an ad-hoc committee headed by the government to deal with an emergency, it took over work which would ordinarily have been performed by the Singapore Council of Social Service, a non-governmental umbrella body which coordinated the work of voluntary organisations in Singapore.⁵⁴ At the meeting of an earlier committee responsible for relief work for civil disasters in January 1960, it had unanimously been agreed that since the SCSS had successfully collected large sums of money for victims of past fires, it should continue to be the authority for raising funds.⁵⁵ However, in the aftermath of the scale of the Bukit Ho Swee fire, the SCSS itself pushed the government to establish a nation-wide relief fund.⁵⁶ At the first meeting of the BHSFNRF committee on 27 May, Byrne explained, 'Normally this would be the responsibility of the Singapore Council of Social Services but in view of the magnitude of the task due to the widespread damage and sufferings caused by the fire, this has become a national issue'. Byrne repeated Lee Kuan Yew's earlier declaration that 'as this was a national effort there should be no party politics', with which the other committee members concurred. The committee resolved that only the receipts and collection tins it issued were to be used for fund-raising and authorised Byrne and Woon to make payments to the fire victims on the committee's

⁵³ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, p. 1606.

⁵⁴ Theresa Ee-Chooi, *Father of Charity and My Father* (Singapore: Raffles Editions, 1997), p. 226.

⁵⁵ SWD 81/61 Vol. IV, Extracts of Minutes of Inaugural Meeting of the Committee with the Overriding Authority to Issue Orders in Times of Civil Disasters Etc., 15 Jan 1960. Byrne was the Chairman of this committee, which was represented by government departments involved in relief work.

⁵⁶ SWD, *Annual Report 1961*, pp. 33-34.

behalf.⁵⁷ Donations to the fund were thereafter jointly handled by the SWD and the SCSS.

Notwithstanding the government's lead in organising the relief effort, social and political organisations and, to a lesser extent, members of the public played important roles in its eventual success. Among the established voluntary organisations in Singapore which had taken care of victims of calamities, the Red Cross and St. John's Ambulance ran a first-aid tent at the centre and provided medical services, while Blue Cross volunteers assisted in the kitchen. The Red Cross declared in its 1961 annual report that '[t]he most outstanding service rendered by the Detachments was at a disastrous fire at Kampong Bukit Ho Swee'.⁵⁸

On 26 May, W. S. Woon called for contributions from the public, stating, 'Funds are very urgently needed'.⁵⁹ He firmly believed that voluntary organisations in Singapore were more successful than the government or government-sponsored organisations in raising funds.⁶⁰ The government contributed \$250,000 to assist the fire victims while the HDB donated an additional \$2,700.⁶¹ The *Sin Chew Jit Poh* surmised that the government's contribution, while substantial, was insufficient to meet the needs of the large number of fire victims and served more as a catalyst to elicit generous donations from the public.⁶² The Ministry of Education also announced the provision of free textbooks and exercise books and the waiver of school fees for the rest of the year for school-going fire victims.⁶³ The first major private contribution to the relief work, however, was a sum of \$25,000 from Lee Kong Chian, the well-known and -regarded Chinese businessman and community leader and the Chairman of the SCSS. His example was followed by other established businesses and business leaders, including the Oversea-Chinese Banking Corporation (\$15,000), Friesland (Malaya) Limited (\$12,000), Chen Su Lan Trust

⁵⁷ SWD 81/61 Vol. I, Minutes of Meeting of the Bukit Ho Swee Fire National Relief Fund Committee, 27 May 1961. See also *SFP*, 27 May 1961.

⁵⁸ Singapore Red Cross Society, *Annual Report 1961*, unpaginated.

⁵⁹ *SFP*, 27 May 1961.

⁶⁰ SWD 81/61 Vol. IV, Extracts of Minutes of Inaugural Meeting of the Committee with the Overriding Authority to Issue Orders in Times of Civil Disasters Etc., 15 Jan 1960.

⁶¹ HDB staff donated \$397.93. HB 595/51 Vol. III, Memo from Assistant Secretary, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 21 Jun 1961.

⁶² *SCJP*, 28 May 1961.

⁶³ ME 2213/61 Memo from Minister for Education to Principals of all Government and Government-Aided Schools, 1 Jun 1961.

(\$10,000), Chinese Chambers of Commerce (\$10,000), Loke Wan Tho (\$10,000), Ngee Ann Kongsi (\$10,000), Shaw Foundation (\$10,000), Singapore Buddhist Federation (\$10,000), Singapore Rubber Packers' Association (\$7,760), Kuah Leong



Plate 7.9. The Pepsi-Cola Factory at Havelock Road and the PAP Delta Branch jointly set up a drinks stall at the relief centre to raise funds. Note the girl in floral dress collecting a carton, reflecting the economic and social role of children in the Chinese nuclear family in postwar Singapore (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 7.10: Nestle Company provides hot drinks for the fire victims. Queues such as this were part of a range of organised everyday routines at the relief centre (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

Bee (\$5,897), Ng Quee Gam and Ng Quee Lam (\$5,000), Rediffusion (\$5,000), Singapore Shell (\$5,000), the Turf Club (\$5,000), Lim Poon Chong (\$3,704),

Singapore Fish Merchants' Association (\$3,375), Cathay Organisation (\$2,981, being proceeds of a charity show held on 18 June), Singapore Tobacco (\$2,500), Hock Lee Bus Company (\$2,000), Singapore Glass Manufacturers (\$2,000), Tong Fong & Co. (\$2,000), General Rubber Trading House (\$1,500), C. K. Tang (\$1,000), Lau Loke Ying (\$1,000), and Mrs Loke Yew (\$1,000).

On 27 May, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Prime Minister of the Federation of Malaya, sent a note to the fire victims, stating, 'Deeply distressed to learn of fire havoc in Tiong Bahru and wish to express to you, on behalf of the Government and people of Malaya, our heartfelt sympathy for the thousands made so suddenly homeless and especially to those afflicted families who suffered casualties'.⁶⁴ The Tunku visited the relief centre on 29 May, accompanied by Lee Kuan Yew, and promised material aid to the fire victims. His government eventually contributed \$20,000 to the relief fund, the largest donation received from a foreign government, although still less than half the sum (\$50,000) given to the victims of the 1959 Tiong Bahru fire. Other governments which sent aid included the United Kingdom (GBP5,000), the United States (US\$10,000), Australia (\$17,000), Brunei (\$10,000), North Borneo (\$10,000), and Sarawak (\$5,000).⁶⁵

The contributions to the relief fund, not surprisingly, came mainly from institutions and much less from individuals, due to the large sector of the population on low incomes.⁶⁶ Various institutions encompassing the main language, religious and ethnic groups in Singapore soon started their own collections, including the newspapers, political parties, schools, overseas students' unions, clan associations, civil organisations, the Tong Chai Medical Association, World Red Swastika Society, Catholic Welfare Services, Methodist Church of Malaya, Kesatuan Kampong Melayu (Malay Settlement Union), Central Sikh Temple, Ramakrishna Mission, and the Singapore Amateur Basketball Association. Other organisations donated relief in kind, including the Blue Cross (bread and rice), Fraser & Neave (6,000 tins of milk and soft drinks), Standard Vacuum Oil (gift packages), Beach

⁶⁴ *ST*, 27 May 1961.

⁶⁵ The lists of donors and donations are derived from newspapers (*ST*, *SFP* and *NYSP*), ME 2213/61 Kampong Ho Swee Fire, and MC 253/61 Bukit Ho Swee Fire National Relief Fund Committee. They are not exhaustive and particular donors have been cited only for analytic purposes.

⁶⁶ Author's interview with Walter Kwek, 25 Jul 2007.

Road market (greens), Nestlé (free milk and milk powder), the American School (gifts), Catholic Welfare Services (a pair of shoes and a piece of cloth for each school-going fire victim), and Cold Storage (100 cartons of milk powder and 2,000 pounds of bread daily). Some volunteer workers established a Fire Relief Labels Committee to sell car stickers and labels donated by the Straits Times Press to raise funds. Rediffusion installed 60 of its entertainment sets at the relief centre while the Indonesian community and Amateur Artistes organised a puppet show and a show at Happy World respectively to raise funds.⁶⁷ On 3 June, in what the press called 'Operation Haircut', 50 barbers from the Singapore Barbers' Association volunteered their services free of charge to fire victims,⁶⁸ while trishaw riders also contributed their earnings to the relief fund.⁶⁹ On 9 June, more than one hundred members of the Taxi Drivers' Association also donated their day's earnings. One taxi driver related, 'The response from all walks of life was not bad. Some people, upon seeing my flag [identifying his participation in the relief effort], booked my taxi for the whole shift'.⁷⁰ Most interesting were the inmates of Changi, Pulau Senang and Outram prisons, who raised \$1,702 and helped cooked meals for the fire victims on the night of the fire. A prisons officer remarked, 'Convicts get very small allowances for working and it is amazing that they manage to save so much money'.⁷¹

The widespread response to the relief effort was also indicative of the more organised nature of late-1950s Singapore society and involved social groups which had previously been on the margins of society and which had also been involved in the upsurge of opinion against the colonial system. A number of militant, left-leaning unions and associations were involved in the relief work, including the Singapore Rural Residents' Association, the Singapore Teachers' Union, the Singapore Chinese School Teachers' Union, the Singapore General Employees' Union, the Naval Base Employees' Union, and the Public Daily-Rated Employees' Union. Students were also particularly active in the relief work. On 26 May, labour unionist Fong Swee Suan appealed to workers to donate generously in the spirit of

⁶⁷ The lists of donors and donations are derived from newspapers (*ST*, *SFP* and *NYSP*), ME 2213/61 Kampong Ho Swee Fire, and MC 253/61 Bukit Ho Swee Fire National Relief Fund Committee.

⁶⁸ *ST*, 31 May 1961.

⁶⁹ RCS, audio recording titled *Speeches On Bukit Ho Swee's Fire By Ministers*, 1 Jun 1961.

⁷⁰ *NYSP*, 10 Jun 1961.

⁷¹ *Sunday Times*, 11 Jun 1961.

class solidarity and support.⁷² The Tiong Bahru branch of the SRRA established a special committee immediately after the fire to begin its relief work and appealed to its members for support. Together with the Petty Traders' Union and Chong Teck and Kai Kok old boys' associations, the SRRA also exhorted the government to adopt the principle of 'collective responsibility' and to form a social organisation to fully take over the relief work, which it was ready to support.⁷³ Chinese Middle School students put on performances at the relief centre to entertain the fire victims, while Chung Cheng High School organised a stage show on 11 June to raise funds.⁷⁴ The students' activism, according to Han Tan Juan, a Senior Middle 2 student of Chung Cheng, was due to their strong organisational ability. Han and his classmates worked at the centre for two nights, going there straight after school and staying till dawn before returning once again to school. They comforted crying children, brought them to the toilet at night, boiled water for the families and collected breakfast and night snacks for them.⁷⁵ More than two hundred University of Malaya Students' Union (UMSU) members and fifty Medical students also helped in the registration, and the UMSU, Nanyang University students and teachers and the Singapore Polytechnic Students' Union also started their own relief funds.⁷⁶

The total nation-wide collection for the BHSFNRF was \$1,586,422.16.⁷⁷ Four payments were made to the fire victims by the end of 1961, totalling \$1.4 million, with each adult receiving \$10, \$20, \$40, and \$50, totalling \$120, and each child receiving \$10, \$10, \$20, and \$25, totalling \$65; consequently a family of three adults and three children would have received \$555.⁷⁸ The amounts, however, were not particularly large compared to payments in the past; the victims of the 1959 Tiong Bahru fire had, for instance, received \$141 each, while in the 1958 Kampong Koo Chye fire, the fire victims had received \$82 each and the relief collections had also been used to help them purchase 3-room houses. A family's economic

⁷² *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

⁷³ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

⁷⁴ OHC, interview with Lim Kok Peng, 16 May 2005.

⁷⁵ Author's interview with Han Tan Juan, 3 Feb 2007.

⁷⁶ The lists of donors and donations are derived from newspapers (*ST*, *SFP* and *NYSP*), ME 2213/61 Kampong Ho Swee Fire, and MC 253/61 Bukit Ho Swee Fire National Relief Fund Committee.

⁷⁷ SWD 81/61 Vol. I, Bukit Ho Swee Fire National Relief Fund Statement of Receipts and Payments as at 30 June 1964.

⁷⁸ *NYSP*, 15 Dec 1961. A fifth payment of indeterminate amount was made on 23 January 1962. The five payments totalled \$1,382,760. SWD 81/61 Vol. I, Bukit Ho Swee Fire National Relief Fund Statement of Receipts and Payments as at 30 June 1964.

rehabilitation required both the usual daily household expenses and the costs of rebuilding from the calamity, such as buying furniture, clothes and other household items, or business assets like hawking carts and livestock. Chen Yin Foo, one of seven young dependents in the family, stated that the relief payments were simply insufficient.⁷⁹ Added to the official payments were varying amounts of private assistance which some fire victims obtained from relatives, friends and colleagues. Lee Soo Seong, earning \$190 a month then as a teacher at a Chinese school, received some money and clothes from his colleagues and students, which helped his family buy new furniture and tide over the crisis.⁸⁰

6. **H. D. B.**
REGISTERED FOR
ACCOMMODATION

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WELFARE
SINGAPORE

REF. Y 00335

NAME Lee Ah Gar
I/C No. SXX 06647
SEX M AGE 28
R.T.P. OF APPLICANT

No. UNDER 16 2 No. OVER 16 5 TOTAL 8

RECORD OF PAYMENT

DATE	RECEIPT No.	AMOUNT	INITIAL
26/5/61	C. 704009	\$ 40/-	MSH
26/5/61	C. 704059	\$ 40/-	MSH
29/6/61	713244	\$ 280	MSH
25/1/62	714238	\$ 50/-	MSH

Estate Manager
Housing & Development Board

RECORD OF GOODS DISTRIBUTED

DATE	PARTICULARS	QUANTITY	INITIAL
4/6/61		1	P. A
3 JUN 1961	704713	\$ 140/-	MSH
30/8/61	710316	\$ 35/-	MSH

25 SEP 1961

Plate 7.11: Lee Ah Gar's relief card issued by the Social Welfare Department for his family of eight, including his two children and younger brother Soo Seong. In all, Lee collected four cash payments, totalling \$449, and three batches of 'goods' (two of which were in fact cash payments totalling \$490 (Courtesy of Lee Ah Gar).

At the relief centre, the minds of the adult fire victims vacillated daily between the tragedy of the past and the uncertainty of the future. There was a

⁷⁹ Author's interview with Chen Yin Foo, 2 Nov 2006.

⁸⁰ OHC, interview with Lee Soo Seong, 19 Nov 1996.

constant cacophony of cries, highlighting a collective story of social and personal tragedy, as Tay Yan Woon recounted:

Everyone spent the whole night crying. Everyone said that their houses were burned down, everything was burned. Every single one did not think of saving their belongings, and by the time they reached Kim Seng, they all started crying.⁸¹

Another lady was so traumatised that she was unable to walk for several days after losing all her family's belongings in the blaze.⁸² Etched onto many adult faces, a journalist observed, was an expression of sheer panic, and, he surmised, 'perhaps they were still imagining a familiar person or an unfamiliar home suddenly appearing in front of them'.⁸³ At the same time, they displayed a nervous alertness, for 'they were not able to sit still for ten minutes. Mentally, they were very alert, and any news from outside would cause them to rush to the door to find out about it'.⁸⁴ A coolie, when asked about living conditions at the centre, however, replied, 'Good! Don't have to worry about this place being burned down'.⁸⁵ Another man joked of a 'miracle' he had witnessed during the fire, laughing bitterly, 'When the fire was at its most ferocious, I saw a person rush madly out of a house. His shadow was on fire'.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Author's interview with Tay Yan Woon, 28 Sep 2006.

⁸² Jacinta Chen Bee Lian, *Rehousing Upheaval and Readjustment*, unpublished academic exercise, Department of Social Studies, University of Singapore, 1966, p. 26.

⁸³ *NYSP*, 29 May 1961.

⁸⁴ *NYSP*, 29 May 1961.

⁸⁵ *NYSP*, 29 May 1961.

⁸⁶ *NYSP*, 29 May 1961.



Plate 7.12: A woman with toddler recalls her tragedy and reviews the uncertainty of life in the future (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

Operation Shift

The next major task confronting the PAP government was to move the fire victims out of the relief centre into proper temporary housing. On the night of the fire, Tan Kia Gan and Lim Kim San, the HDB Chairman, had surveyed the fire site and on the following day began planning how to rebuild the area and rehouse the fire victims as quickly as possible.⁸⁷ The decision to press ahead with the plans came from Lee Kuan Yew, who had already visited the fire site.⁸⁸ On the 26th, the PAP cabinet held a special meeting to discuss the relief operations, followed by a conference between Lee and the HDB officials. The government then announced that it would acquire the fire site and build low-cost flats on it for the fire victims, while those who refused the HDB housing would receive cash relief payments

⁸⁷ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, p. 1614.

⁸⁸ Author's interview with Alan Choe, 27 Nov 2006.

instead. On 27 May, Lee optimistically declared that '[e]ven if there are 5,000 families affected, we can build enough flats for them'.⁸⁹ Four days later, Tan Kia Gan announced in the Legislative Assembly that about 40% of the fire victims could move immediately into 1,150 flats on a short-term basis before the Bukit Ho Swee flats were completed. Of these, there were 600 flats in Queenstown,⁹⁰ 300 in Tiong Bahru (the site of the 1959 blaze), 150 in Kallang, and 100 in Clarence Lane, Alexandra. The remaining fire victims would be successively rehoused in HDB housing elsewhere – 450 2-room flats at the Tiong Bahru fire site within a few days; 904 flats at the Tiong Bahru cemetery site (Ma Kau Thiong) in August; 804 flats at MacPherson Road Estate within the next few months; and a further 1,448 2- and 3-room flats in Queenstown at some point in the future.⁹¹ In comparison with previous fires in the locality in 1955 and 1959, the PAP government was able to provide temporary housing for the Bukit Ho Swee fire victims much closer to their former homes; in the 1959 Tiong Bahru inferno, for instance, the fire victims had been offered accommodation at Kallang Estate. This more appropriate response was due to the development of the Queenstown project and construction in Tiong Bahru after the 1959 fire. On 30 May, Lee made a pledge to the fire victims, saying, 'In nine months' time a sufficient number of units will be completed by the Housing and Development Board to house every fire victim family'.⁹² On 2 June, the HDB began registering the first fire victims for the available 1,150 flats.

On 4 June, ten days after the fire and amid National Day celebrations,⁹³ more than 1,000 families, totalling an estimated 6,500 persons, began leaving River Valley Primary School (Chinese) and River Valley Middle School at about 9 am. Assisted by relatives, friends and volunteer workers and directed by SWD and HDB officials, policemen, soldiers, and school teachers, and carrying their surviving belongings, they boarded army lorries to be transported to 1- and 2-room flats in Queenstown, Tiong Bahru, Alexandra, and Kallang. About 400 families moved into

⁸⁹ *ST*, 27 May 1961.

⁹⁰ The HDB had planned to open up to the public the register for housing in Queenstown, for which demand had been poor, but some of these flats were subsequently occupied by the Bukit Ho Swee fire victims. HB 778/47 Vol. III, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 6 Oct 1961.

⁹¹ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, p. 1570.

⁹² *ST*, 30 May 1961.

⁹³ *SM*, 4 Jun 1961. National Day was 3 June, being the day in 1959 when Singapore became a self-governing state, but celebrated on the 4th, a Saturday, and 5th.

nearby flats built on the Tiong Bahru fire site, while about 100 Malay fire victims moved out to the SWD's Bushey Park Home and elsewhere.⁹⁴ The concern with overcrowding at the centre had produced, the *Sunday Times* reported, 'an air of urgency' in what the paper termed 'Operation Shift'. In some cases, technicians were still fixing the water and electricity supply in the flats when the families arrived.⁹⁵ All adult fire victims had been given a rehabilitation allowance of \$20 each while children 15 years old and below received \$10. W. S. Woon also gave the assurance that all fire victims, whether residing in HDB flats or with relatives and friends, could apply to return to the houses built on the fire site.⁹⁶ The following day, Ministry of Health and Work Brigade teams began cleaning up the vacated schools, which reopened for classes on the 6th. More homeless families departed from the other schools in the following days, with River Valley Primary School (English) reopening on the 7th. Kim Seng West Primary School (Integrated) and Kim Seng East Primary (English) reopened on 10 June, thirteen days after the fire. The speed and effectiveness of the rehousing effort compares favourably with that of the 1959 Tiong Bahru fire, where the fire victims left the relief centre within a week.

In a subsequent Ministry of Culture documentary about the post-fire shift, a Chinese fire victim family, comprising a couple, 3-4 children and a grandmother, all smiling, were depicted to be moving happily into an HDB flat, as the narrator stated, 'With new homes, the dangers of such devastating fires will be gone forever'.⁹⁷ However, a small-scale study of 30 Bukit Ho Swee fire victim families rehoused in Kallang Estate by Jacinta Chen in 1965 shows that many families were totally confused upon moving into an HDB flat. Among eleven informants, only two women had ever visited friends living in such flats, while the others had never set foot inside a flat before. The physical layout of the estate itself, neatly-organised in form compared to the closely- and haphazardly-built wooden housing in the kampong, initially posed problems of orientation and navigation. As Chen explained, the very neatness of appearance was disorientating: 'Two housewives told me with some amusement that they used to get confused about their flats. The blocks looked

⁹⁴ ME 2213/61, Memo from Principal, River Valley English School, to Director of Education, MOE, 5 Jun 1961.

⁹⁵ *ST*, 4 Jun 1961.

⁹⁶ *ST*, 3 Jun 1961.

⁹⁷ MC, audio-visual programme titled *The People's Singapore*, broadcast in the 1960s, exact date unknown.



Plate 7.13: Operation Shift. In the background are the makeshift army tents ringed by barbed wire (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 7.14: A family of five, assisted by two students of River Valley Middle School, prepare to enter their temporary HDB flat. They have scarcely any belongings. A family member, partially obscured, peers over the parapet at the height of the building (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

all the same to them at first. They took hours to walk back to the flat from the market'.⁹⁸

To many families, moving into the allocated HDB housing was less a matter of choice than of accepting what appeared to them at that point in time to be the only feasible option. Wang Ah Tee, whose house was fortunately spared by the fire, put it succinctly, '我们没有路可以走了' ['We had no other roads to walk'].⁹⁹ According to Goh Sin Tub, there were both fire victims who wanted HDB flats and those who still preferred to build wooden houses on the fire site.¹⁰⁰ For the former, it was a singular opportunity to pragmatically jump to the front of the HDB housing register to obtain a non-flammable flat with modern amenities. To a large extent, however, the actual speed at which the rehabilitation work moved in the end often made it difficult for shell-shocked families to obtain alternative housing.¹⁰¹ The family of Lee Ah Gar and Lee Soo Seong, totalling eight persons, accepted a 2-room flat at Margaret Drive in Queenstown. In explaining the decision, Ah Gar simply said, 'We had no choice at the time'. However, the family soon had to split up because the flat was too small, with Ah Gar and his father renting a room in an attap house near Beo Lane, which had escaped the fire, while Soo Seong and the rest of the family lived in the flat.¹⁰² For Lim Soo Hiang and her family of nine, who moved into a 3-room flat at Stirling Road, Queenstown, the sum of relief they collected was only enough to buy some furniture for the new house.¹⁰³ Beh Poh Suan and her three-year-old son, who had spent the night of the fire on Ma Kau Thiong among the graves, gratefully accepted a flat at the Tiong Bahru fire site, because 'as long as it was safe, that was good enough. We didn't worry about whether it was good or not'.¹⁰⁴

But despite the operation having a smooth appearance of success, half of the fire victims initially did not move to the HDB flats. On 4 June itself, about 600 families at the relief centre, comprising more than a fifth of the total number, left to

⁹⁸ Chen, *Rehousing Upheaval and Readjustment*, pp. 36, 43-44.

⁹⁹ Author's interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007.

¹⁰⁰ Goh, 'The Bukit Ho Swee Fire', p. 161.

¹⁰¹ See also Chen, *Rehousing Upheaval and Readjustment*, p. 31.

¹⁰² Author's interviews with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006, and Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006; OHC, interview with Lee Soo Seong, 19 Nov 1996.

¹⁰³ Author's interview with Lim Soo Hiang, 2 Jan 2008.

¹⁰⁴ Author's interview with Beh Poh Suan, 14 Feb 2007.

stay with their relatives and friends after collecting their rehabilitation payments. They joined 950 other families (4,546 persons) who had already done so. In fact, only 1,300 out of a total of 2,833 fire victim families had registered for HDB housing.¹⁰⁵ In fact, by 1 July, a total of 1,387 families had rejected the offer of an HDB flat and collected cash payments in lieu of the rent subsidies.¹⁰⁶ But later in the year, 600 families who had been living with relatives and friends applied for and were rehoused in HDB flats.¹⁰⁷ Although this meant that only 787 families (28%) eventually rejected the offer of an HDB flat, the fact that the initial number of rejections was nearly double indicates a strong preference for alternative housing among the fire victims.

Among those who did not move into an HDB flat were those families whose wooden houses had survived the fire. Peter Lim's family went back to 16 Beo Lane,¹⁰⁸ while Roy Chan's family, who did not register as fire victims or collect relief, returned to their looted house at 587 Havelock Road.¹⁰⁹ When Tay Bok Chiu's family moved back into their house in Si Kah Teng, they found in the devastated area an eerie silence, and as Tay said, 'We were very afraid because there was no one else in the vicinity'.¹¹⁰ Those who *chose* not to move into an HDB flat fell into two categories: they were either unable or unwilling to afford the costs of living in a flat or were able to find alternative housing. In the case of the latter, those who were either financially better off or had social or business support networks were able to dictate the terms of their rehousing. Chua Beng Huat's family, for instance, did not stay in the relief centre but moved temporarily into a vacant house belonging to his uncle at Thomson Road. Subsequently, diverging from the experiences of most other families, they moved into an SIT flat at Dawson Road. Later, due to the efforts of Chua's mother, who wanted to return to the Bukit Ho Swee area, they obtained a large Singapore Improvement Trust flat with three bedrooms in Tiong Bahru Estate.¹¹¹ For Oh Boon Eng and his younger sister Gek Heok, their father, a painting subcontractor, managed to obtain help from his

¹⁰⁵ *SFP*, 5 Jun 1961.

¹⁰⁶ *ST*, 1 Jul 1961.

¹⁰⁷ HDB, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 9.

¹⁰⁸ Author's interview with Peter Lim, 8 Feb 2007.

¹⁰⁹ Author's interview with Roy Chan, 2 Apr 2007.

¹¹⁰ Author's interview with Tay Bok Chiu, 24 Jan 2007.

¹¹¹ Author's interview with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006.

business associates, who gave the beleaguered family ‘large boxes of clothes’ several days after the fire. Through one such friend, the family moved into a wooden house along Havelock Road, below Ma Kau Thiong, and later found a private house nearby, where they stayed until 1968.¹¹² Deterred by the high rent of HDB housing, Tan Tiam Ho and Beh Swee Kim also moved into a wooden house in Hong Lim Pa Sat.¹¹³

Other fire victims, however, were determined to resume their traditional kampong lifestyle. Tay Yan Woon and her family moved into an attap house at Po Lay Long [referring to the Singapore Glass Manufacturers in Kampong Henderson], explaining ‘we didn’t want a flat because we still wanted to rear pigs. So we went to Poh Lay Long and rented an attap house to rear pigs’.¹¹⁴ The family of Goh Hin Choo, comprising his wife and nine children, also rejected the HDB offer of a flat at Margaret Drive as it was too far. Goh rented a cubicle in a shophouse at New Bridge Road instead and started working as a bicycle repairman. On 14 July, about six weeks later, the shophouse was also gutted by a fire. A desolate Goh, sobbing, said, ‘I have lost every stitch of clothing except what I am wearing now. We are really destitute now’.¹¹⁵

The Big Singapore Fire Debate

The PAP government did not merely take the lead in organising the Bukit Ho Swee fire relief operation. Together with the mass media, it also framed the event in terms of a discourse of national unity, in which the government celebrated the successful response to a devastating calamity by a young nation-state, one which only recently obtained full self-government. This story of national unity and a responsible swift response to calamity stood in marked contrast to the revelations of ugly partisan politics in the relief work following the 1958 Kampong Koo Chye and 1959 Tiong Bahru fires. The SWD hailed the relief effort as

¹¹² Author’s interviews with Oh Gek Heok, 1 Apr 2007, and Oh Boon Eng, 4 Apr 2007.

¹¹³ Author’s interviews with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007, and Beh Swee Kim, 22 Jan 2007.

¹¹⁴ Author’s interview with Tay Yan Woon, 28 Sep 2006.

¹¹⁵ *ST*, 14 Jul 1961.

one of the proudest chapters in our annals, when the sufferings of fellow citizens evoked such a spontaneous and generous reaction from all levels of the people of the country. Indeed history will record that this was an occasion of common suffering which has tested and gloriously proved the unity of our people.¹¹⁶

Nevertheless, the façade of national cohesion belied both political and social disagreements over the methods and terms of the government's relief work. In mid-1960, Ong Eng Guan and two fellow PAP Assemblymen had joined the opposition in the Legislative Assembly.¹¹⁷ Ong then resigned his Hong Lim seat but regained it by crushing his PAP rival in a by-election in April 1961, which signalled his popularity in the constituency and exposed the government's political vulnerability.¹¹⁸ The PAP, however, soon experienced a more serious and widening fracture between the Lee Kuan Yew group of Fabian socialists and the radical left led by Lim Chin Siong which had not yet become manifest at the time of the fire. It was in this factional context that disagreements over relief work surfaced during the special Legislative Assembly session of 31 May, which the *Straits Times* termed 'The Great Singapore Fire Debate'.¹¹⁹ The session centered on a motion proposed by Tan Kia Gan: 'that to prevent a recurrence of such disastrous fires the site of the fire be acquired by the Government for the Housing and Development Board for rebuilding, and to this end that no one be allowed to rebuild on this site structures of a temporary or permanent nature'. The motion also stipulated that compensation for the owners of land on the fire site be calculated at a much lower value of the land in its encumbered state before the fire. These proposed terms of wholesale land acquisition necessitated an amendment to the Land Acquisition Ordinance.¹²⁰ Both the motion and amendment were eventually passed, and the debate was significantly less politically divisive than that which took place in the Assembly after the 1959 Tiong Bahru fire, but the importance of the various issues raised became all too apparent in the ensuing months.

¹¹⁶ SWD, *Annual Report 1961*, Special Pictorial Section.

¹¹⁷ Ong retained his Hong Lim seat through a by-election and formed the United People's Party.

¹¹⁸ Ong polled 73% of the vote against Jek Yeun Thong.

¹¹⁹ *ST*, 1 Jun 1961.

¹²⁰ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, pp. 1565-66.

Although the Lim Yew Hock government had previously acquired the Tiong Bahru fire site after the 1959 inferno for public housing, the PAP leadership's proposed amendment to the Land Acquisition Ordinance now gave it far greater power in determining the terms of acquiring fire sites in general. Almost the entire Bukit Ho Swee fire site belonged to 53 private owners, comprising a few large owners possessing up to 12 acres of land and the remainder owning one-half to two acres. Lee Kuan Yew argued that 'it is heinous in the extreme to allow profit to be made out of this fire and in fact, if any profit is allowed to be made, then it will only be an inducement, a temptation, to arson by those who possess land with squatters on it'. Land without tenants, as was the case for the fire site, he maintained, was worth about three times more than land with tenants, according to the government land valuer. In assessing its value, Lee contended, the Bukit Ho Swee fire site should not be regarded as land cleared of structures, which would fetch a higher valuation, but as encumbered with tenants. He referred to land valuations made in 1954 by the City Assessor of the area, then encumbered, at 43 cents per square foot, and by the government valuer at 41 cents. The onus, Lee continued, was on landowners to prove that their land was vacant at the time of the fire, whereupon the Minister for National Development would have the discretion of raising the amount of compensation.¹²¹

A. P. Rajah, Singapore People's Alliance Assemblyman for Farrer Park, accepted the acquisition principle in general but questioned the provisions allowing the government to acquire any land free of tenants adjoining the fire site. He also disputed the discretionary power given to the Minister for National Development to raise the amount of compensation, suggesting instead that the compensation be fixed at market value.¹²² Lee replied that the adjoining vacant land ought to be acquired at the same value as the devastated land 'from the point of view of expeditious land acquiring in a fair manner'. In addition, Lee added, the 'one-third' principle would effectively discourage landlords from attempting arson to clear their land and indeed encourage them to set up facilities to prevent the outbreak of fire.¹²³

¹²¹ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, pp. 1615-19.

¹²² *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, pp. 1619-21.

¹²³ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, pp. 1624-26.

Rajah also took the government to task for ‘the absolute mishandling of the situation’ in allowing the fire to jump two roads, particularly the second road since the Fire Brigade should have been prepared after the first flare-up. He argued that the Government should bear ‘a great deal of blame’ for the low water pressure, asking ‘why was the pressure in these fire hydrants allowed to run down, particularly in the Bukit Ho Swee area where such a fire is likely to occur?’ Rajah called for the government to appoint a commission of inquiry into the causes of the fire and its subsequent spread so that future disasters would be averted.¹²⁴ Ong Pang Boon, the Minister for Home Affairs, replied that while the water pressure was admittedly low that day, the real difficulty was the lack of road access to the fire. He also stated that the police were still investigating the cause of the fire and that arson had not been ruled out.¹²⁵ Lee Siew Choh, PAP Assemblyman for Queenstown, accused Rajah of being an ‘armchair critic’ and likened him to a ‘robber taking opportunity of the fire to rob’ [From a Chinese saying, ‘趁火打劫’].¹²⁶

Tan Kia Gan also announced that fire victims temporarily rehoused in HDB flats would pay full rents at economic rates normally charged to members of the public. Tan stated that this was based on principles of equity and good public finance; the government, he explained, did not intend to ‘upset the very complex rent structure of the Housing and Development Board by introducing rent-free periods or by waiving rents’, which was ‘ill-considered’ and unfair to the tax-paying population and victims of smaller fires who had also paid normal rents. The fire victims consequently had to pay different rents depending on the size, location and building costs of the flats they rented, ranging widely between \$20 for a 1-room HDB-built flat to \$89.10 for a 3-room SIT flat.¹²⁷ To help the fire victims cope, the government permitted families to either share accommodation with relatives or friends already living in HDB flats or for two small families to jointly apply for a single flat. In addition, instead of rent waivers, the government would give the fire

¹²⁴ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, pp. 1581-84.

¹²⁵ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, pp. 1593-94.

¹²⁶ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, pp. 1587-88.

¹²⁷ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, p. 1611. According to Tan Kia Gan, rents for 3-room SIT flats differed widely within a housing estate, such as \$42, \$55 and \$89 for various units in Queenstown, and \$38.50, \$40.70, \$48.80, \$57.20, \$60.70, \$66, \$69.30, \$75, \$79.20, and \$89.10 for various units in Tiong Bahru Estate.

victims a three-month rental subsidy, amounting to \$7 per person up to a maximum of \$35 per family.¹²⁸ The subsidy, according to K. M. Byrne, was worked out on the basis of the lowest monthly rent payable for HDB housing at the time, being \$35 per flat for a family of five.¹²⁹ Responding to the government's rental subsidy, Ong Eng Guan, who had scored a resounding triumph in the Hong Lim by-election only a month before the Bukit Ho Swee fire, pointed out that the subsidy was considerably less than the assistance given in previous fires at Upper Chin Chew Street and Geylang Lorong 3, which amounted to three months' free rental, water and electricity and the flexibility of paying arrears in installments.¹³⁰ In fact, in mid-1960, the PAP government had already been concerned over the loss of rents, amounting to \$81,425.10, suffered by the HDB in providing rent-free periods of temporary housing for fire victims between February 1959 and March 1960, mostly to subsidise the 1959 Tiong Bahru fire victims. In July 1960, the Board had been asked 'to economise and to concentrate on building houses to let'.¹³¹ Later, W. S. Woon informed him that 'it is expected that the fire victims should pay for such accommodation in future'.¹³²

The issue of reasonable rent was of deep concern to the fire victims. It was very apparent in an exchange between Lee Kuan Yew and a fire victim at the relief centre on 28 May. The latter, who earned '\$100 plus' a month and had a family of four, had lost all his belongings except for some clothes. He felt that the relief provisions provided at the centre were adequate but was more concerned about the prospects of rehousing, particularly the rent, location of housing and proximity to relatives:

Man: In future, I think have to get housing, cheap housing. \$15-20.

Lee: \$25 OK?

Man: \$20 *lah*. We are all poor people *mah*. \$20 is OK.

Lee: We will all try to help – is Queenstown or Redhill OK?

¹²⁸ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, pp. 1570-71, 1612.

¹²⁹ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, p. 1604.

¹³⁰ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, p. 1575.

¹³¹ SWD 61/60, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Director, SWD, 4 Jul 1960.

¹³² SWD 61/60, Memo from Director, SWD, to CEO, HDB, 28 Aug 1960. The victims of the previous fires were eventually informed to pay rent at an assisted rate. HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 17.

Man: Any in Tiong Bahru?

Lee: No. Queenstown or Redhill?

Man: Queenstown is OK. As long as close to work, it's OK.

Lee: Where do you work?

Man: Cross Street [in 'Big Town'].

Lee: From Queenstown to Cross Street is not too far, right?

Man: Not far.

Lee: Only 4 people in your family, right? I think we will definitely be able to give you a flat.

Man: 2 flats is OK too.

Lee: Oh, 2 flats, we will give to bigger families.

Man: But then my elder sister can also move in.

Lee: Did your elder sister stay with you last time?

Man: No.

Lee: Now we must take care of the fire victims, then the elder sister and relatives of the fire victims. Do you think this is fair?

Man: Fair.¹³³

The Anger and the Rumours

The political debate in the aftermath of the fire was relatively muted, given the PAP government's numerical dominance in the Legislative Assembly. More persistent was the fire victims' anger over two key issues raised by the politicians, namely, arson and rent, as well as the rumours through which much unhappiness was articulated and sustained. The government, attempting to maintain control over the relief operation, viewed the persistent rumours with apprehension. It tried to undermine them by representing the rumours as baseless and contradictory. Nonetheless, such efforts were not completely successful. As Arlette Farge observed of rumours circulating in working class districts in 18th century Paris, 'there was nothing more powerful...than those exchanges of words between neighbours' (or in

¹³³ RCS, audio programme titled *Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew Tours Tiong Bahru After Bukit Ho Swee Fire*, broadcast on 28 May 1961.

the case of Bukit Ho Swee, former neighbours).¹³⁴ The fire victims' 'exchanges' clearly demonstrated the social cohesion of the former kampong community and its continued social and political distance from the ruling government.

The cause of the fire, which remained unascertained despite the government's assurances to solve the mystery, sustained a strong undercurrent of anger. There were admittedly different types of rumours, such as the 'moderate' ones attributing the inferno to a cooking accident like an overturned stove.¹³⁵ The most powerful and persistent rumour by far, however, was the certainty expressed by many fire victims that the government had deliberately set the fire in order to clear the 'squatters'. This association in the victims' minds of fire and clearance had already been formed after previous kampong fires but was now substantially hardened by the scale and local circumstances of the Bukit Ho Swee disaster. The local fire-fighting volunteers, as discussed previously, had been looking out for arsonists in the kampong prior to the outbreak of the fire. Tay Ah Chuan explained that 'this suspicion was because in the past, things like that had happened. Like throwing burning rags onto attap roofs, the things we saw'.¹³⁶ The rumour of government-inspired arson was persistent because it possessed an inner logic which could not readily be proved nor disproved. Its proponents were able to link the local circumstances both before and after the fire into part of a powerful web of conspiracy, a theory supported seemingly by evidence and history. Government officials complained that the fire victims were naïve and gullible to believe in the idea of officially-inspired arson but the theory was consistent with the world-view and everyday experience of the former dwellers of a place deemed a 'black area'.

In the view of many fire victims, the first possible indication of arson was that 25 May was a public holiday. This meant that the kampong children were not at school, but the men were fortunately at home to take care of their families and consequently a minimum number of lives were lost.¹³⁷ It was widely-believed that

¹³⁴ Arlette Farge, *Fragile Lives: Violence, Power and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 13.

¹³⁵ Author's interviews with Roy Chan, 2 Apr 2007, Soh Boon Quee, 4 Feb 2007, and Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007. See also the views of Tay Bok Chiu and Tay Ah Chuan at the beginning of the previous chapter.

¹³⁶ Author's interview with Goh Ah Mong, 24 May 2007.

¹³⁷ Author's interview with Mok Lee Choo, 8 Jan 2007.

‘the arson was in several spots within the whole complex, so it looked like a very organised type of thing and then no one was burned or hurt and were all safely evacuated’.¹³⁸ Moreover, the fire managed to jump two roads and was burning in different places at the same time. As one fire victim wondered, ‘Why did the fire not just burn this area but jump to other places? Why were there fires at different places? First it was at Jalan Membina, then it jumped over here, and there’.¹³⁹ It was not possible, some people reasoned, that even with the strong wind, for the fire rolling down Beo Lane to leapfrog the 3-storey Or Kio Tau shophouse, leave it untouched and advance towards Delta Estate. Such a ‘curious’ path of destruction suggested that a plane, visible in the air that day, had separately set the area north of Or Kio Tau ablaze.¹⁴⁰ As a contemporary of the time explained, ‘There were people saying that the government set the fire to evict the residents in the area. It is hard to say, it was speculation. Because they had been living there for so long and there had been no fires, so suddenly....And then some people said that there were fires at different places in the kampong at the same time’.¹⁴¹

The government’s culpability, it was argued, also lay in the marked contrast between its failure to subdue the fire and its success in swiftly rehousing the fire victims. As one fire victim maintained, ‘the fire engines that came did not fight the fire but sat in the middle of the road and only obstructed the traffic. The government was there but didn’t fight the fire but just stood there. The government wanted to evict the people, so why fight the fire?’¹⁴² In the aftermath of the inferno, the authorities also appeared to have prepared a coherent plan to quickly acquire and clear the fire site and build public housing on it. Even before the fire, the HDB had begun to build multi-storey housing in the vicinity, and the completed, mostly vacant flats at the Tiong Bahru fire site and the partially-completed flats at Ma Kau Thiong were pragmatically used to swiftly rehouse the fire victims.¹⁴³ Some families had already been served with notices to quit their wooden houses before the fire.¹⁴⁴

¹³⁸ Author’s interview with C. C. Chin, 24 Nov 2006.

¹³⁹ Author’s interview with Low Boon Tiong, 25 Apr 2007.

¹⁴⁰ Author’s interviews with Soh Ming Lee, 10 Sep 2007, and Low Boon Tiong, 25 Apr 2007.

¹⁴¹ Author’s interview with Koeh Sia Yong, 15 Mar 2007.

¹⁴² Author’s interview with Lee An Nia, 31 Dec 2006.

¹⁴³ Author’s interviews with Wee Toh Lok, 27 Apr 2007, Lee An Nia, 31 Dec 2006, and Ong Bin, 26 Jun 2007.

¹⁴⁴ Chen, *Rehousing Upheaval and Readjustment*, p. 34.

One fire victim observed that ‘the government had great difficulty trying to evict the kampong residents. So many of them, and they also didn’t want to move. So if there was a fire, you had to move even if you were unwilling’.¹⁴⁵

Some of the allegations were of course factually erroneous. Many men, for instance, were in fact working that day while the plane seen in the air was likely to be taking photographs of the blaze. On 1 June, government officials at the relief centre tried to suppress the rumours by attacking the logic of conspiracy and attributing the allegations to malicious ‘outsiders’ and ‘agitators’. An emotional Chan Choy Siong, speaking in Hokkien, urged that it did not make sense for the government to set the fire and then carry out a comprehensive relief operation to help the fire victims:

Only people who have not gone to see the plight of the fire victims can laugh and talk wildly about it from the outside, can spread rumours without evidence to confuse our residents here....As for the government’s plans to provide relief, the Legislative Assembly session yesterday has already reached an agreement, including members from the opposition parties. If we had not prepared a good plan, how would the opposition parties have supported the government’s relief efforts? So I hope that the fire victims staying here or with relatives and friends will not believe what the outsiders are saying. Because all these rumours are without evidence. You can see that our government has taken care of the fire victims after the fire, regardless of whether they are adults or children or students....Many opportunists are spreading rumours so that you would be agitated and would not cooperate with the government, so that the government’s relief work would fail. So then they would be able to reap political capital from this fire. This is their motive. But I declare here and now that, having seen the great suffering of more than 10,000 fire victims, these people who are trying to reap political capital from the fire disaster are heartless people! [Applause]....So I

¹⁴⁵ Author’s interview with Lau Wai Meng, 22 Jul 2007.

hope that you will not listen to rumours from outside preventing cooperation between you residents and the government. Who will lose out if this happens? It would be the 16,000 people's loss, because we would then not be able to proceed with our relief work.¹⁴⁶

An un-named SWD official, also speaking in Hokkien, similarly argued that the rumours were baseless, although, interestingly, he implied that someone else had set the fire:

People outside are spreading malicious rumours that this fire was started by the government. [Laughter] If the fire was started by me, I would not dare to come here. Why dare not come? I would be beaten up, right? This is straightforward, this is plain language, this is the reality. See, when the fire was raging, Prime Minister Lee and the ministers came to fight the fire. But it was not possible, the fire was too powerful. So brothers and sisters, your pains are the pains of our government. [Some clapping] Your joy, your happiness are the joy and happiness of our government. This is the truth. So let us all face the truth together. So whoever started this fire is a heartless person who started this fire. Our government definitely did not start this fire. Who started this fire definitely would not come to this place, and would not dare to come here and face the truth.¹⁴⁷

The rumours, however, persisted even after the fire victims left the relief centre, sustained in part by the authorities' failure to provide a definitive answer on the issue and by revelations in the press of alleged arson in the locality. The *Nanyang Siang Pau* had reported on 28 May that various theories on the cause of the fire were circulating, with some people attributing the fire to arson, and that the Criminal Investigations Department was conducting an inquiry into the matter and had summoned for questioning two residents living near 174-A Kampong Tiong Bahru, where the fire had started.¹⁴⁸ By early June, more than ten alleged witnesses

¹⁴⁶ RCS, audio recording titled *Speeches On Bukit Ho Swee's Fire By Ministers*, 1 Jun 1961.

¹⁴⁷ RCS, audio recording titled *Speeches On Bukit Ho Swee's Fire By Ministers*, 1 Jun 1961.

¹⁴⁸ *NYSP*, 28 May 1961.

of arson had been questioned, leading the newspaper to remark that their combined testimonies were sufficient reason to believe that the fire was caused by arson but that only concrete evidence was lacking.¹⁴⁹ On 27 May, an attempt at arson was also made on a vacated attap house at Kampong Henderson, although the fire was discovered in time by the neighbours and extinguished. The residents retrieved a piece of oil-soaked kindling material at the scene.¹⁵⁰ Further attempts were made on another attap house in the same kampong on 8 and 9 June but the local fire-fighting squad, formed after the first incident, quickly contained the fire. The *Nanyang Siang Pau* declared that 'the daring of the arsonists has made them Singaporeans' public enemy' such that 'the Kampong Henderson arson incident does not merely concern its residents but all Singaporeans'. The paper hailed the collective effort of the fire-fighting squad in suppressing the fire but called for the 1.6 million urban dwellers in Singapore to work together with the police to resolve the issue.¹⁵¹ Another arson attempt in Kampong Henderson on 9 June was also foiled by the local fire-fighting squad, although not before 50 people had been rendered homeless.¹⁵² On 14 June, a *Sin Chew Jit Poh* editorial concluded that '[f]rom the several cases of attempted arson reported within the last two weeks so soon after the big Bukit Ho Swee fire, there is every possibility that the recent biggest fire was caused by some wicked elements'.¹⁵³ Two weeks later, two alleged attempts of arson on the wooden housing at Carey Road below Ma Kau Thiong, which had survived the Bukit Ho Swee fire, were also foiled.¹⁵⁴ In a press statement, the Singapore Country People's Association declared that these attempts at arson were not the work of individuals but of a group.¹⁵⁵

As the result of police investigations into the cause of the Bukit Ho Swee blaze, a suspect was detained and interrogated by the police on 9 June but was later released, reportedly due to a lack of evidence.¹⁵⁶ At this point, local news coverage of the police investigations ceased. Goh Sin Tub later claimed that 'the investigation

¹⁴⁹ *NYSP*, 10 Jun 1961.

¹⁵⁰ *NYSP*, 28 May 1961, and 13 Jun 1961.

¹⁵¹ *NYSP*, 13 Jun 1961.

¹⁵² *ST*, 9 Jun 1961.

¹⁵³ *SCJP*, 14 Jun 1961.

¹⁵⁴ *ST*, 14 Jul 1961.

¹⁵⁵ *NYSP*, 8 Jul 1961.

¹⁵⁶ *NYSP*, 28 May 1961.

was very quick and it was made very clear how the fire had started. I think it was some cooking utensil somewhere or other that fell'.¹⁵⁷ However, to date, I have not come across any published official report on the cause of the fire.

From the standpoint of urban social history, the rumours, regardless of their validity, are important social facts. For the fire victims, the rumours constituted a persuasive interpretation of local circumstances and a sufficient explanation for a colossal calamity, which suddenly rendered them homeless. In time, the rumours developed into a new social mythology, powerfully associating the clearance of urban kampongs directly with the building of public housing. Subsequent kampong fires came to be widely-perceived, by many of the victims at least, as ‘又是好象河水山’ [‘just like another Bukit Ho Swee’].¹⁵⁸

The other festering issue which troubled the PAP government was the economic costs and liability of the temporary public housing. The fire had rendered jobless the heads of at least 1,000 households and placed them on the SWD's Public Assistance Scheme.¹⁵⁹ *The Sin Chew Jit Poh* warned that many fire victims' livelihoods had been severely disrupted, as the inferno had destroyed various aspects of the kampong economy, such as the local factories, home industries and semi-rural economic activities.¹⁶⁰ Among the fire victim families who initially rebuffed the offer of an HDB flat and had collected cash payments in lieu of the rental subsidies, about 22% later decided to accept a flat and consequently had to pay full rent for the first three months of occupation. The subsidies themselves, pegged to a maximum of \$35 per family, were also inadequate for larger families living in the bigger flats or flats built by the SIT and let out at higher rentals. Lim Peng Chye, a driver with two children earning only \$125 a month, had to pay \$45 rent for his temporary HDB flat, three times the rent for his former wooden house at Beo Lane. He said, 'I am grateful to the Government subsidy of \$35 a month for three months. This means I have to pay only \$10 each month. But at the end of the three months, I'll have

¹⁵⁷ OHC, interview with Goh Sin Tub, 12 Oct 1993; Goh, 'The Bukit Ho Swee Fire', p. 165.

¹⁵⁸ Author's interview with Lim Yew Kuan, 21 Nov 2006.

¹⁵⁹ SWD, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 38.

¹⁶⁰ *SCJP*, 31 May 1961.

difficulty in getting \$45 to pay the rent'.¹⁶¹ Tan Geok Hak's family, which moved into a flat at the Tiong Bahru fire site, was unable to pay rent for a full year, for '[e]veryone had no money. How do you collect the rent?'¹⁶² In addition, Jacinta Chen's study of fire victims rehoused in Kallang Estate suggests that the further a family was rehoused from their relatives, the more difficult it was to obtain financial assistance from them.¹⁶³

Tan Kia Gan's announcement in the Legislative Assembly on 31 May that the rents for the HDB flats would be charged at full economic rates triggered widespread rumours of high rents. On 2 June, Lee Kuan Yew and his ministers, after explaining the rehabilitation plans to the fire victims at the relief centre, were 'mobbed' by the audience, who demanded further discussion of the relief provisions. After a 45-minute meeting between the ministers and three representatives of the fire victims, the government agreed to a three months' period of grace to pay the water and electricity deposits for the HDB flats.¹⁶⁴ The previous day, Chan Choy Siong had tried to dispel such fears at the centre but without actually stating how much the rents would cost:

I know that now there are many people who are repeatedly talking about the \$70, \$80 and \$90 [rental] problem. This is not the problem we should be discussing now. Do you think that, when you are not able to pay a single cent, we will ask you to pay \$90?! This is not possible. So now, please do not listen to other people saying that the government's housing over there are \$90, \$70 or \$80. At present, these are the rents for the government's housing but when the fire victims are unable to pay a single cent, can they afford these rents?! [Applause and shouts of 'No!'] So please do not believe rumours that the government will charge you \$90 now.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ *ST*, 4 Jun 1961.

¹⁶² Author's interview with Tan Geok Hak, 5 Oct 2006.

¹⁶³ Chen, *Rehousing Upheaval and Readjustment*, pp. 39-42.

¹⁶⁴ *ST*, 3 June 1961.

¹⁶⁵ RCS, audio recording titled *Speeches On Bukit Ho Swee's Fire By Ministers*, 1 Jun 1961.

As in the case of the arson issue, Chan attempted to suppress the rumours by disassociating them from the fire victims themselves and attributing them to ‘outsiders’. Goh Sin Tub also spoke of encountering ‘subversives’ and ‘agitators’ at the relief centre, allegedly from the PAP left, who claimed to be representatives of the fire victims but were not fire victims themselves. The ‘representatives’ sought his permission to hold a mass rally of the fire victims in the centre. According to Goh, ‘They may be out to cause even riots...because they were out to agitate against the government. What they were trying to tell the people by word of mouth even was that the government was not doing enough for them, that if they ganged together, they could persuade the government to rebuild their attap houses in Bukit Ho Swee’. Such ‘agitation’, Goh maintained, reinforced accusations made by the same ‘representatives’ that the Government had set fire to the kampong to clear the area for redevelopment. He turned down the request and screened ‘some blockbuster Chinese films’ to distract the fire victims when the ‘agitators’ attempted to organise an unauthorised meeting.¹⁶⁶ At a meeting of the BHSFNRF committee in 1965, W. S. Woon revealed the existence of ‘a plot to stage a “stay put” in the relief centre’.¹⁶⁷

On 1 July, when Lee Kuan Yew and Tan Kia Gan paid surprise visits to fire victims rehoused in Queenstown and Tiong Bahru, they encountered numerous complaints. Lee realised that while ‘[a]t present, what we are doing for them has helped them’, ‘[w]hat they are concerned [about] now is their future’.¹⁶⁸ The main anxiety, particularly for those advanced in age or unemployed, was over the \$55 monthly rental, which would be unsubsidised after the third month of residence. Lee assured them that new flats would be ready for occupancy within three months at \$20 rentals and that, if they were not, there would be further subsidies. Other grievances were also primarily economic: the added burden of having to pay for water and electricity and the difficulty of obtaining transport to school for the children. In addition, the new estates were still lacking adequate amenities like clinics and telephones, and the lifts were frequently out of order. Lee acknowledged that Queenstown, unlike Bukit Ho Swee, did not have a good bus service but

¹⁶⁶ OHC, interview with Goh Sin Tub, 12 Oct 1993; *ST*, 6 Aug 1963; Goh, ‘The Bukit Ho Swee Fire’, pp. 165-67. Goh’s claim that the ‘agitators’ were from the Barisan is undermined by the fact that the party was not formed until September 1961.

¹⁶⁶ *SLAD*, 31 May 1961, p. 1614.

¹⁶⁷ SWD 81/61 Vol. I, Minutes of Meeting of the BHSFNRF Committee, 19 Aug 1965.

¹⁶⁸ *NYSP*, 2 Jul 1961.

promised the fire victims that he would get a bus service to run there.¹⁶⁹ He stated that the government would make further payouts from the relief fund but also urged the fire victims to be thrifty in using water and electricity.¹⁷⁰

The question of rent became politicised later that year, by which time the Lim Chin Siong group had left the PAP to form the Barisan Sosialis.¹⁷¹ The new party took on the cause of the fire victims in its struggle with the ruling government to attain political legitimacy. On 21 November, a committee purportedly chosen by the fire victims, called the Bukit Ho Swee Fire Victims' Representatives (‘河水山灾民代表团’), submitted a memorandum to the Ministry of National Development, detailing the problems encountered with the HDB flats. It called for rentals to be lowered, for a waiver of rent for the first three months of occupation, and for fire victims in rental arrears, who had already received ‘urgent’ notices of arrears from the HDB, to be permitted to pay them in installments. Grievances over rentals were partly economic in nature but also political. As the notices of arrears issue demonstrates, living in an HDB flat entailed one's increased integration into a national system of public housing financially managed by the state. For the fire victims, used to an informal system of credit in the kampong, be it in the form of payment of rent or purchase of provisions, having now to pay rent, at a stipulated time of the month or to handle official letters, was both psychologically mortifying and politically disempowering because one had to deal directly with officialdom. The 15 fire victim families rehoused in Kallang Estate surveyed in Jacinta Chen's study were intensely unhappy with the high rent and its administration, because in the kampong they had been familiar with the landlords and chief tenants and could

¹⁶⁹ *NYSP*, 2 Jul 1961.

¹⁷⁰ *ST*, 1 Jul 1961.

¹⁷¹ The Barisan Sosialis was formed in September 1961 by members of the PAP radical left, such as Lee Siew Choh (Chairman), Lim Chin Siong (Secretary-General), S. Woodhull (Vice-Chairman), and Fong Swee Suan, who had broken away from the PAP in July. The party adopted a militant anti-colonial posture, demanding immediate full and complete independence from colonial rule and the creation of a socialist, democratic Malaya, including Singapore. It opposed the PAP's plan to join Malaysia under the terms of the British-sponsored ‘Grand Design’. The Barisan challenge threatened the PAP's control of the Legislative Assembly, with 13 Assemblymen switching sides, leaving the PAP with only a majority of one (26) in July 1961. It also greatly weakened the PAP's hold over the Chinese-speaking population, with 37 of the 51 party branches, 19 of 23 of its organising secretaries and many of its grassroots organisers and activists joining the new party. Chan Choy Siong, Assemblywoman for Delta, however, remained loyal to the PAP. The Barisan's influence in the rural areas and among wooden house dwellers in Singapore is discussed in the following chapter.

ask for a payment to be deferred, but it was impossible with the HDB.¹⁷² As Tay Ah Chuan put it simply, many former residents of Bukit Ho Swee did not relish moving into an HDB flat partly because at the end of the month, they had to pay rent.¹⁷³

On 27 November, a 6-man delegation from the committee, accompanied by Lee Siew Choh, now Barisan Assemblyman for Queenstown, met Tan Kia Gan to discuss these issues. On 5 December, the Ministry of National Development released a press statement accusing the committee of milking a social problem for political capital. It claimed that some of its members were from the Barisan Sosialis, who 'had used the housing question to create dissatisfaction among the fire victims' and 'engineered for a group of the fire victims more gullible than the rest to petition or to go in groups from Minister to Minister in order that more could be obtained for these victims'.¹⁷⁴ On 14 December, the problem of rent faced by the fire victims was brought up in the Legislative Assembly by Lee Siew Choh and other opposition members from other political parties. Tan Kia Gan defended his Ministry's rehousing work, stating that the government had done its utmost in rehousing the fire victims. He pointed out that the ministry had given a 3-month rent subsidy and a bundle of food and clothing each valued at \$22 to each fire victim and also made four cash payments from the relief fund. Tan also assured that fire victims would be allowed to pay their arrears in installments and would not be evicted from their flats. He conceded, however, that there were grounds for unhappiness, as large families given 1-room flats had yet to be allocated bigger apartments because the larger flats being built at the Bukit Ho Swee fire site were still unfinished.¹⁷⁵

On 18 December, the committee issued a reply, denying that it was stirring up the fire victims at the Barisan's instigation. It insisted that it was not seeking new concessions but was merely asking the government to fulfill its promises – for the rent to be waived for three months, the rent to be lowered, the arrears to be paid through installments, the amount collected for and distribution of the Bukit Ho Swee Fire National Relief Fund to be announced, and the fire victims to be given priority

¹⁷² Chen, *Rehousing Upheaval and Readjustment*, pp. 50-52. The informants felt strongly that the rentals they had to pay were extremely 'unfair' because they were higher than those paid by earlier tenants in the same flats. The HDB revalued the rents upwards before the fire victims had moved in.

¹⁷³ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 13 Sep 2006.

¹⁷⁴ *NYSP*, 15 Dec 1961; *ST*, 19 Dec 1961.

¹⁷⁵ *NYSP*, 15 Dec 1961; *SLAD*, 14 Dec 1961, pp. 2192-93; 2200-2204.

for the new flats in Bukit Ho Swee. The committee claimed that following the submission of its memorandum to the Ministry, the HDB had served more notices of arrears to fire victims, demanding, allegedly, that they pay the arrears within three days or face eviction. The committee also stated that in their delegates' meeting with Tan Kia Gan, he had begun the meeting by demanding, '你们灾民住屋子一定是不必付房租吗?' ['Are you fire victims living in the flats sure that you don't have to pay rent?'] Tan, allegedly, turned down the request for rent reduction as unreasonable, since there were tenants paying \$90 rentals or more elsewhere (a point which Chan Choy Siong had tried to downplay). Tan was said to have wanted the fire victims to use the relief payments for the rent instead of spending the money on clothing and furniture, as 'the question of restoring your family life to normal can take its time'. The committee's appeal for a 3-month rent waiver was also rejected, although it had argued that precedents already existed in the rehousing of victims of the 1959 Kampong Tiong Bahru and 1961 Upper Chin Chew Street fires. Tan, it seemed, had also denied that Lee Kuan Yew had promised to extend the duration of rent subsidy if necessary, a guarantee made on 1 July. Instead, Tan had assured the committee that he would stop the HDB from sending out notices of arrears but fire victims apparently continued to receive them. In a bid to exert pressure on the government, the committee asked the politicians to account for the amount of money remaining in the BHSFNRF, supposedly totalling \$618,000. Finally, the committee called on Tan to hold a mass meeting of the fire victims to allow them to establish their claim as bona-fide representatives. The statement ended by stating that the committee would organise the fire victims to carry out a protest and petition the minister.¹⁷⁶ No such protest materialised, although a Complaint Bureau was established that month to look into the fire victims' grievances, which allowed them to pay the arrears in installments.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ *NYSP*, 18 Dec 1961; *ST*, 19 Dec 1961. W. S. Woon subsequently informed the *NYSP* that the committee's estimations of the size of the relief fund were incorrect, that \$1,581,923.22 was collected and \$1,430,592.38 paid out to the fire victims, leaving a balance of only \$151,330.84. SWD 81/61 Vol. I, Letter from W. S. Woon, Secretary-Treasurer of BHSFNRF National Committee, to Editor, *NYSP*, 18 Dec 61.

¹⁷⁷ Chen, *Rehousing Upheaval and Readjustment*, p. 53. It appeared that some of Chen's informants had been part of the delegation which went to see Tan Kia Gan on 27 November or had done so separately.

Despite the apparent concern and social resistance, the relief operation moved inexorably forward. The government had decided to acquire the fire site for public housing less than a week after the towering blaze and prevented wooden housing from being re-erected amidst the ashes. Half of the fire victims were rehoused in temporary Housing and Development Board flats within two weeks, and by the end of the year, the proportion had risen to more than three-quarters. The People's Action Party leadership's performance in the emergency had been characterised by speed and political resolve. Its actions were markedly superior in these two basic aspects of emergency relief to what previous governments had accomplished for victims of fire. What was at stake was not merely the rehabilitation of a large number of disaster victims but also the establishment of a modern housing estate in place of a former 'black area'. This initiative involved asserting control over what was formerly a mobile urban population residing in a largely autonomous place outside the Central Area. As part of the PAP's endeavour to transform postwar Singapore society, the relief work was of necessity a national operation. As rumours of arson and high rents continued to circulate, it became imperative to the government that the final stage of rehabilitation – the rehousing of the fire victims in modern flats built on the fire site – be successfully accomplished within the stipulated time-frame that Lee Kuan Yew had promised.

Chapter 8

Nine Months

While the victims of the Bukit Ho Swee inferno were temporarily living in Housing and Development Board flats or with relatives and friends, feverish building activity was taking place on the fire site itself. This chapter discusses how Bukit Ho Swee Estate, the first major housing project started and completed by the HDB, provided the People's Action Party government with an important head start to its ambitious plan to replace the semi-autonomous 'black areas' of Singapore with planned modern public housing estates. The Bukit Ho Swee project was robustly underpinned by the principles of high modernism which has since characterised the PAP's social policy: scientific-rational planning and organisation, and rapid and determined implementation. Rebuilding the fire site, as Lim Kim San, the first HDB Chairman, later stated, 'was a question of management. How to bring together all the components of such massive construction and put them on schedule?'¹ The emergency housing process readily overcame isolated instances of resistance to land acquisition and clearance from both the landowners and tenants in the locality, and, the fire victims. It also gave the HDB a strategic foothold towards transforming the urban spaces south and west of the Singapore River. The rapid emergence of Bukit Ho Swee Estate consequently signalled a major turning point in the history of postwar Singapore. The public housing policy resettled a previously-mobile people by dictating the terms on which they now could obtain their housing. The government was consequently able to begin the large-scale process of integrating low-income Chinese kampong dwellers into the formally reorganised social fabric of the young state and usher Singapore into the modern era in the mid-twentieth century.

'A war on the all too familiar ogres and giants': The PAP's Public Housing Policy, 1960

¹ SBC, audio-visual programme titled *Diary of a Nation: Bukit Ho Swee Fire, 25 May 1961*, broadcast on 25 May 1988.

For the PAP government, the very identity of the new citizen and where they lived were questions which were inextricably bound up with the future development of the state. On the surface, the alleged purpose of providing public housing was purely altruistic. In a meeting with the American Consul General in July 1959, Ong Eng Guan, the Minister for National Development, explained that building low-cost housing was the government's top priority because it raised living standards and provided employment for low-income families.² However, by the time the PAP came to power, it had become acutely aware of the British attempts to clear wooden house settlements and to build emergency housing on fire sites in the 1950s, and consequently, of the social and political importance of rehousing the previously-mobile, semi-autonomous urban kampong population in regulated public housing.

Although it was originally an anti-colonial party which advocated the interests of low-income Chinese, the PAP had well-defined ideas on how to integrate the population socially and politically into the structure of the state once some degree of independence from colonial rule had been achieved. The people's partial 'liberation' from colonial dominion in 1959 was consequently quickly followed by a radical reconfiguration of the society and economy, undertaken by the popularly-elected government. As Lim Kim San reflected, 'Once the severance between the colonial masters and us becomes apparent...then you'll have to adopt a different kind of stand, isn't it? No more destroying, fighting. It's more about construction, development and building'.³ Significantly, the 1959 Constitution did not give Singapore independence but it granted the elected government full control over housing.

The importance of housing development to the PAP was manifest in the run-up to the May 1959 general elections. In its election campaign, the party drew up an ambitious 9-point programme which envisaged a thorough restructuring of Singapore society.⁴ The PAP declared that it would take a leading role in providing

² RG 59, 746F.00/7-959, Memo of Conversation between US Consul General and Ong Eng Guan, 9 Jul 1959.

³ OHC, interview with Lim Kim San, 13 Feb 1985.

⁴ PAP, *The Tasks Ahead: The PAP's Five-Year Plan, 1959-1964*, Part 2 (Singapore: People's Action Party, 1959). The 9-point programme also aimed to industrialise the economy, develop the rural areas, protect the rights of labour, achieve the emancipation of women, expand the education system, improve health standards, streamline the civil service, and build a non-communal Malayan nation.

low-cost housing for the people, by replacing the Singapore Improvement Trust with a housing authority under the government's direct control.⁵ With leftwing leaders like Lim Chin Siong and Chan Chiaw Thor still under detention, Lee Kuan Yew's faction was in complete control of the party.⁶ Lee's group subscribed to modernist ideas about housing. Ong Eng Guan's speech at a mass rally in February revealed the party's attempt both to initially declare its ideas about modern housing and to allay fears of eviction among the kampong population whom constituted its mass base. Ong, adopting a decidedly anti-colonial tone, promised that the PAP would build 10,000 units of low-cost housing yearly, unlike the SIT, which had failed miserably. He also assured the victims of the Tiong Bahru fire that the party would seriously consider their wish to continue to live in wooden housing. However, Ong also endorsed the SIT's modernist concepts of planned neighbourhoods, satellite towns and organised kampongs which assumed a greater importance in the party's public housing programme. He also aimed to have the 1958 Master Plan revised, not rejected, and land use in Singapore properly planned.⁷

The PAP cabinet formed after the elections was a young one, with an average age of only 37 years and possessing a collective determination to undertake ambitious social projects. Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was 35, while Goh Keng Swee, his deputy and the Minister of Finance, was 40. The 1959 Singapore Annual Report described the nine ministers as possessing 'ability, confidence and courage, and a clear programme, well and long-debated beforehand among themselves, and in public'.⁸ Scholars have hitherto focussed on the political side of this programme, that is, Lee's struggle against the left and to obtain independence for Singapore through a merger with Malaya. However, his government was just as determined to launch radical social and economic programmes to remake Singapore and fashion the people into loyal citizens of the new state. The British Commissioner of Singapore, who admired the Lee Kuan Yew group as practical-minded and

⁵ *Petir*, May 1959, pp. 1, 3, 11. See also Lee Kuan Yew's comments in the Legislative Assembly on 26 Jan 1959. *SLAD*, 26 Jan 1959, p. 1827.

⁶ The detained leftists were released after the elections but not given ministerial positions in the PAP government. Chan Chiaw Thor was appointed the Field Secretary in the Primary Production Department dealing with agricultural matters.

⁷ PAP, *The Tasks Ahead*, Part 2, pp. 28-31.

⁸ Singapore, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 9.

intelligent individuals,⁹ nevertheless warned that they possessed a ‘totalitarian streak that rides roughshod over all opposition or criticism’.¹⁰ After the elections, the PAP established a Ministry of Culture which intervened in matters of social leisure and culture to ‘engender the feeling of something new and something shared between communities’.¹¹ The People’s Association, chaired by the Prime Minister himself, similarly sought ‘to instill in the youth of Singapore a sense of national identity and a spirit of dedicated service to the community....which transcends communal and racial loyalties’. Through the community centres, the PA attempted to draw the population into the orbit of a social life and values endorsed by the government.¹² Such integrative policies aimed not only to break down communal and religious divides but also to remove the social and political distance between dwellers of ‘black areas’ and the official establishment.

Housing was considered the most important pillar of the government’s social programmes because it could kickstart the entire process of social and political engineering. The PAP leadership aimed to transform the entrepot-based economy into an industrial one in order to provide jobs for Singapore’s rapidly-growing population.¹³ By 1960, the island’s population, buoyed by a high annual birth rate of 4.5% between 1947-1957, had risen to 1.6 million. However, a third of the economically-active population was gainfully employed that year, with most of the remainder engaged in casual employment. Nearly half of the population (46%) was also 15 years old and younger,¹⁴ although this high dependency ratio masked the fact that young people typically did some work to support their families. The full extent of unemployment at this time was also difficult to gauge because there was no

⁹ CO 1030/562, Despatch from British Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 26 Jun 1959.

¹⁰ CO 1030/562, Despatch from British Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 7 Sep 1959.

¹¹ Singapore, *Annual Report 1960*, pp. 7-8; MC, *Towards a More Just Society* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1959), p. 5.

¹² Singapore, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 7.

¹³ Economic views of housing had already begun to enter official thinking in the late 1950s. In 1957, F. C. Bentham, the Economic Adviser to the Chief Minister, identified public housing as a major source of capital formation for Singapore’s economy, necessary to provide for its growing population. F. C. Benham, *Economic Survey: Singapore 1957* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1957), p. 11.

¹⁴ MOF, *State of Singapore Development Plan, 1961-1964* (Singapore: 1961), p. 2; Singapore, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 9.

compulsory registration of the unemployed.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the PAP duly declared that the main economic problem facing Singapore was the provision of employment.¹⁶ In August 1961, the government established the Economic Development Board (EDB) to attract foreign investors to establish manufacturing industries in Singapore. However, this industrialisation programme was painfully slow to take off. In mid-1960, the Australian Commissioner in Singapore observed that the government had failed to deal with the unemployment problem after thirteen months in office.¹⁷ The following year, Albert Winsemius, a practical-minded Dutch economist who had headed a United Nations mission to examine the feasibility of industrialisation for Singapore, advised the government to ‘show something very early’ to attract foreign investors, ‘which at least gave the impression that we were making progress’. ‘The only thing we could do’, Winsemius concluded, ‘was building flats’. When he asked Howe Yoon Chong, formerly Chief Executive Officer of the HDB before becoming the Permanent Secretary in the Ministry of National Development, how many flats the Board could build yearly, Howe replied without hesitation, ‘Physically and from a financial point of view, 18,000’. Winsemius viewed this figure as risky but Howe was adamant it could be accomplished.¹⁸ British and Australian observers likewise believed that the PAP’s housing targets were overly-ambitious in view of what the SIT had managed to build previously.¹⁹

But the new government was firmly committed to waging ‘a war on the all too familiar ogres and giants in a subservient society – poverty, disease, ignorance, squalor, and idleness or unemployment’.²⁰ The party envisaged its first year in office as one of ‘peaceful revolution’, in which public funds would be generously used to meet ‘the needs of the neglected masses, the slum and kampong dwellers and the

¹⁵ Singapore, ‘Labour and Welfare’, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 150. The authorities used the number of people seeking work at two government-run Employment Exchanges to estimate the unemployment figures, although such job-seekers included those in full, irregular or casual employment.

¹⁶ *Petir*, Apr 1959, p. 2. See also PAP, *The Tasks Ahead*, Part 1, pp. 19-27.

¹⁷ A1838/751/2 Part I, Despatch from Acting Australian Commissioner to Department of External Affairs, 9 Jul 1960.

¹⁸ OHC, interview with Albert Winsemius, 30 Aug-3 Sep 1982.

¹⁹ CO 1030/562, Despatch from British Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 26 Jun 1959; A1838/751/2 Part I, Despatch from Acting Australian Commissioner to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 20 Oct 1960.

²⁰ MC, *Democratic Socialism in Action, June 1959-April 1963* (Singapore: Publicity Division, Ministry of Culture, 1963), unpaginated.

rural people'.²¹ An article in *Petir*, the PAP's official organ, pledged the government's all-out effort to build more houses for the low-income population.²² Ong Eng Guan subsequently announced a \$415 million plan to build 84,000 houses over five years. The Australian Commissioner felt that the government was incapable of funding such a massive budget either through taxes or loans.²³ After Ong fell out with the party in 1960, the PAP's 'replacement' plan turned out to be equally ambitious and comprehensive in launching Singapore's housing development.

In April 1961, Goh Keng Swee presented the State Development Plan for 1961-1965 to the Legislative Assembly as the government attempted 'to match our population growth with at least a similar rate of expansion to provide jobs for your growing population'.²⁴ Of the Plan's \$871 million budget, \$350 million (40%) was allocated to the social services, compared to 58% for economic development, with \$153.6 million assigned to building 51,031 units of housing over four years.²⁵ Although this sum was only a fifth of Ong Eng Guan's original budget, it was still the largest item of expenditure for the social services and the second largest overall after industry and commerce. Goh Keng Swee hailed the housing budget 'an all-time record for Singapore' unmatched anywhere else in Asia;²⁶ it contrasted favourably with the \$94.3 million the Labour Front government had spent on housing in 1955-1960.²⁷ Goh was confident that the government had the financial resources to undertake this massive building programme.²⁸ The PAP had inherited a financially solvent administration from the British regime, which also continued to provide loans to the Singapore government.²⁹ The full budget was funded by the state's revenue surplus (\$116 million) and assets (\$245 million), and local private loans to the government (\$230 million), with the remaining third of the budget coming from

²¹ MC, *One Year of Peaceful Revolution, June 3, 1959 to June 3, 1960* (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1960), unpaginated.

²² *Petir*, Jul 1959, p. 5.

²³ A1838/751/2 Part I, Despatch from Acting Australian Commissioner to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 21 Sep 1959.

²⁴ *SLAD*, 12 Apr 1961, p. 1231.

²⁵ Singapore, 'Finance & Development', *Annual Report 1961*, pp. 103-105.

²⁶ *SLAD*, 12 Apr 1961, p. 1233.

²⁷ MOF, *State of Singapore Development Plan, 1961-1964*, p. 25.

²⁸ A1838/751/2 Part I, Despatch from Acting Australian Commissioner to Department of External Affairs, 30 Nov 1959.

²⁹ Robert E. Gamer, *The Politics of Urban Development in Singapore* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), p. 41.

foreign loans and assistance. Indicative of the importance of housing to Singapore's overall development, the Minister for National Development was appointed to a Development Planning Committee which oversaw the implementation of the Development Plan,³⁰ while the Chairman of the HDB was also made a member of the EDB.³¹

The government's dominant role with respect to housing in the Development Plan was striking. The Plan estimated that 14,000 new units of dwellings needed to be built yearly to meet the demand arising from the annual population increase, the existing housing deficiency and slum clearance. In 1961, a commission led by Lim Tay Boh, an economist, concluded that private developers should build housing for the middle and lower-middle classes to complement the government's housing programme for the low-income population.³² But under the government's Development Plan, the HDB shouldered the main responsibility to build 11,500 units of housing, with the private sector considered incapable of building more than 2,250 units.³³

The PAP's housing programme was wholly high modernist in character. In February 1960, the new government brought the Housing and Development Ordinance into force, thereby replacing the SIT with a statutory housing authority under the Ministry of National Development with full legal powers and a mandate to build.³⁴ The HDB's first 5-Year Building Programme sought to erect low-cost housing in properly-planned estates ahead of a longer-term plan to redevelop the City area.³⁵ To enable the Board to focus on housing, the Trust's planning duties were transferred to a newly-created Planning Department.³⁶ The HDB, conceptually, was a child of the Lim Yew Hock government, which had supported the passing of

³⁰ Singapore, 'Finance & Development', *Annual Report 1961*, pp. 90-91.

³¹ Singapore, 'Finance & Development', *Annual Report 1961*, p. 97.

³² Singapore, *Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Constructional Capacity of Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1961), pp. 48-52. The Commission's report was published in September 1961, after the Bukit Ho Swee fire. HDB housing was open for application to Singaporeans above 21 years old in a family of five or more persons, with no member earning more than \$500 per month and the total monthly family income not over \$800.

³³ MOF, *State of Singapore Development Plan, 1961-1964*, p. 6.

³⁴ The Minister for National Development had the formal authority to appoint the Board's Chairman, Deputy Chairman and three members. CO 1030/1597, Memo titled 'Public Housing in Singapore' by the UK Commission, 16 Apr 1963.

³⁵ HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, pp. 8-10.

³⁶ Singapore, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 85.

the Housing and Development Board Bill in January 1959 before the elections. Indeed the call for a proper housing authority had been made as early as 1947 by a Housing Committee.³⁷

To the PAP government, housing was not merely living space but rather was a crucial instrument for forging a desired identity and social values for the making of the modern Singaporean. In December 1960, a week-long HDB exhibition on low-cost housing attracted 80,000 people and introduced the Board's potential tenants to a new way of life. It explained the rationale behind the HDB's efforts to clear 'squatters', decentralise housing outside the Central Area and plan land use systematically.³⁸ An instructional film denounced as anti-social the rearing of poultry in flats, urinating in lifts, littering, and the peddling of insanitary food by 'lazy and irresponsible residents', and showed instead, contrasting photographs of the clean, litter- and obstruction-free public spaces of the idealised new housing estates.³⁹

Not surprisingly, the PAP government and its colonial predecessor held similar views on the future of unauthorised wooden housing. In 1960, when 4,500 such buildings stood on Board land,⁴⁰ the government declared that no such new housing was permitted on either State or Board lands and any 'encroachments' found would be summarily demolished. Current wooden house dwellers would be evicted if the land was required for immediate public development or would otherwise have to obtain a Temporary Occupation Licence regularising their occupation until such development took place.⁴¹ In September 1961, the HDB was delegated the authority, previously held by the Chief Building Surveyor under the Ministry of National Development, to administer the building bylaws for the reconstruction and repair of temporary housing on Board land. The HDB adopted a simplified and tough procedure, whereby applications to build new temporary

³⁷ Singapore, *Report of the Housing Committee, 1947* (Singapore: Government Printing House, 1948), p. 9.

³⁸ HB 74/1/59, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 8 Dec 1960; HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 43.

³⁹ HB 74/1/59, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Acting PS, MND, 30 Nov 1960; HB 544/52, Minutes of the Public Relations & Advisory Committee Meeting, 5 Jul 1960.

⁴⁰ HB 266/46, Memo from Acting Chief Building Surveyor to PS, MND, 19 Aug 1960.

⁴¹ *SLAD*, 11 May 1960, pp. 534-35.

buildings would be rejected, with discretionary powers to approve only minor extensions to existing buildings for health reasons. The Board also allowed only minimum essential repairs, and treated ‘all applications for repairs as requests for rehousing so that the huts can be demolished and rehousing effected’.⁴² By mid-1962, the PAP government had already demolished 615 unauthorised buildings on State land since coming to power.

Unlike the SIT, however, the HDB adopted a firmer policy towards emergency public housing, although such accommodation contradicted the Board’s basic ‘principle of providing flats of sound construction, clean design and pleasant surroundings for the lower-income group for rents which they can afford’.⁴³ In 1960, the Treasury, aware of the high maintenance costs of emergency housing, had viewed it as a retrograde step.⁴⁴ Teh Cheang Wan, the HDB’s Chief Architect, agreed that while the capital cost of a 1-room emergency unit was 49% cheaper than that for a standard 1-room unit, the former incurred an additional \$13.35 in monthly maintenance costs.⁴⁵ But pressure from the PAP government forced the Board to construct 30% of its housing under the State Development Plan as 1-room flats, compared to 40% and 30% for 2- and 3-room units respectively. Although the HDB viewed the 2-room flat as its minimum housing standard, it accepted the necessity of building at least 10,000 1-room flats, most of them emergency units, near the Central Area as a short-term measure to accommodate the inner-city low-income population. Privately, the Board’s members felt that such emergency housing would constitute ‘controlled slums’ which were ‘inadvisable if not impolitic’ to build, but accepted that ‘political considerations were more pressing and that the Housing Board might have to sacrifice its ideas on what units should be constructed’.⁴⁶ The PAP government’s position on emergency housing concurred with the SIT’s view in its final year of existence. Toh Shung Pie, the Acting Deputy Manager of the Trust, had emphasised the need to concentrate on building emergency housing in the short-term in order ‘to cut costs to the minimum, and to increase efficiency to the

⁴² HB 266/46, Memo from Secretary, HDB, to Lands Manager, HDB, 20 Sep 1961; and Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 21 Sep 1960.

⁴³ HDB, *Annual Report 1963*, p. 1.

⁴⁴ HB 1095/49 Vol. II, Memo on Public Housing & Rental Policy from Deputy Secretary, Treasury, to Cabinet, 25 Jul 1960.

⁴⁵ HB 16/59 Vol. I, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 9 Mar 1960.

⁴⁶ HB 871/57, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Members of the Board, 10 Oct 1960.

maximum'. Toh also suggested that the Trust build 2-room thick emergency housing blocks with the flats facing each other across a common corridor, a design which became characteristic of the HDB's emergency housing.⁴⁷ In October 1960, officials from the Board, the Ministry of National Development and the Ministry of Finance considered a proposal to build the maximum number of 1-room units near the Central Area in 1960-1961 and particularly at the Tiong Bahru cemetery site at \$20 monthly rentals.⁴⁸ The next month, the Ministry instructed the Board to continue the SIT's experiment with regard to 1-room emergency housing by preparing a suitable design for the government's consideration.⁴⁹

The Board also decided to build multi-storey housing, due to the shortage of land for large-scale housing in the City and its low initial construction and maintenance costs.⁵⁰ The decision to go high-rise could also be traced to the SIT's proposal in late 1959 to build 'skyscrapers', with lifts equipped only for blocks of ten or more storeys.⁵¹ The monthly rentals of the HDB's flats were \$20, \$40 and \$60 for 1-, 2- and 3-room flats respectively, inclusive of service and conservancy charges for emergency housing with communal toilets and kitchens, but exclusive for standard housing with its own toilets and kitchens. Such rents were lower than the actual economic rates and were made possible only by a five-year government subsidy amounting to \$11.7 million.⁵²

In May-June 1960, Lim Chong Keat, a prominent architect and a member of the HDB Board, and Teh Cheang Wan attended an international housing conference in Israel. The photographs of the Board's housing which were presented at the conference were subsequently published. The publication stated that the Board's housing projects and land use would conform strictly to the 1955 Master Plan. It contained plans and photographs of the ongoing construction at the Tiong Bahru fire

⁴⁷ HB 74/59, Memo by Acting Deputy Manager, SIT, undated, c. Jun 1959.

⁴⁸ HB 16/59 Vol. I, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, and PS, MOF, 11 Oct 1960.

⁴⁹ HB 16/59 Vol. I, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 28 Nov 1960; Memo from PS, MND, to CEO, HDB, 23 Nov 1960; and Notes of a Meeting at the MND, 6 Oct 1960.

⁵⁰ HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, pp. 10, 32-33; HB 188/59, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MOF, 26 Jan 1961; OHC, interview with Lim Kim San, 13 Feb 1985; author's interview with Alan Choe, 27 Nov 2006. Piling increased the cost of building a 1-room unit by \$500-600. HB 999/48 Vol. I, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 17 Oct 1960.

⁵¹ HB 74/59, Memo by Acting Deputy Manager, SIT, undated, c. Jun 1959.

⁵² HDB, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 1; CO 1030/1597, Memo titled 'Public Housing in Singapore' by the UK Commission, 16 Apr 1963.

site, including the 1-room emergency flats. The presentation of these plans to an international professional audience demonstrated that the Board had accepted the necessity to build emergency housing as a short-term measure.⁵³ The opportunity to discuss with delegates from other countries also gave the HDB added confidence that it could achieve its building goals. The Board's representatives concluded that 'Singapore was building permanent dwelling accommodation equipped with all the facilities of water, electricity, gas and modern sanitation, at much lower cost per unit than anywhere else'.⁵⁴

'You cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs': The HDB's Managers and Architects

The PAP leadership assembled a hard-headed and single-minded group of individuals to achieve its ambitious housing goals. Alarmed by the anti-colonial stance of the new government and the consequent lack of job security, J. M. Fraser had left the SIT along with most of his expatriate colleagues.⁵⁵ In December 1959, Ong Eng Guan, the new Chairman, revealed that 30 out of the Trust's 35 senior expatriate officers had been dismissed or released.⁵⁶ By 1961, only two of the 38 senior officers in the HDB were expatriates, with the Board having recruited eight locally domiciled senior officers and 116 junior officers.⁵⁷ This was akin, as Lim Kim San remarked later, to a case of 'fools rushing in where angels fear to tread'.⁵⁸

The HDB, however, had Goh Keng Swee, arguably the second most important member of the PAP cabinet, as the intellectual and financial sponsor of its public housing programme. Goh had been heavily involved in social research with the Social Welfare Department and had briefly been its Director before resigning in

⁵³ HDB, *Low Cost Housing: Photographs Illustrating Some Recent Public Housing Projects and Building Activities in the State of Singapore* (Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1960), unpaginated.

⁵⁴ HB 188/59, Letter from CEO, HDB, to Chairman, Building Industry Inquiry Commission, 8 Sep 1960.

⁵⁵ HB 800/56, Brief from Singapore Improvement Trust Staff Officers' Association, 27 Jan 1958.

⁵⁶ *SLAD*, 14 Dec 1959, pp. 1183-84; CO 1030/562, Despatch from British Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 7 Sep 1959.

⁵⁷ HDB, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 7.

⁵⁸ Melanie Chew, interview with Lim Kim San, in *Leaders of Singapore* (Singapore: Resource Press, 1996), p. 163.

1958 to contest the general elections. Whilst in the Department, he had undertaken two influential studies of housing: *A Social Survey of Singapore* (1947), and an extended study which became *Urban Incomes and Housing* (1956).⁵⁹ In the latter, Goh had identified the difficulties of mapping and controlling unauthorised wooden housing as major cartographic and social problems to be tackled.⁶⁰ As a PAP leader and a member of the colonial civil service, Goh provided the thread of continuity between the British colonial and PAP governments in their similar approaches to socially remake Singapore society.

Goh Keng Swee's former classmate at Raffles College, and a successful banker and entrepreneur, was Lim Kim San.⁶¹ Lee Kuan Yew, who had appointed Lim as the Deputy Chairman of the Public Service Commission, asked him to head the HDB,⁶² because, Lee later rationalised, '[i]t was crucial, life and death. If we failed, we would not be re-elected'.⁶³ As Tay Kheng Soon, a contemporary architect, observed, 'It was Dr Goh who turned the nuts and bolts together, and Lim Kim San who actually carried out the plan. The strategic thinking of Dr Goh, while Lim Kim San did the legwork'.⁶⁴ Lim had no prior experience in housing but this was indeed part of the government's staffing policy for the public housing programme.⁶⁵ As a former businessman, Lim was fully focussed on achieving building targets and, unlike Ong Eng Guan, did not worry about the fact that disgruntled evicted 'squatters' might cost the government votes.⁶⁶ In fact, Lim was appointed to the

⁵⁹ Goh Keng Swee, while doing his doctoral dissertation in Economics at the London School of Economics, formed the Malayan Forum with Toh Chin Chye, also doing his doctorate in Medicine in London. The organisation became a platform for political discussion among overseas Malayan students in Britain. They were joined later by Lee Kuan Yew, then pursuing his law degree at Cambridge University. Upon their return to Singapore, the three men became acquainted with the left and, together, formed the PAP in 1954. Chew, interview with Goh Keng Swee, in *Leaders of Singapore*, pp. 144-46; and Tan Siok Sun, *Goh Keng Swee: A Portrait* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2007), pp. 50-52; 67-74.

⁶⁰ Goh's survey of the urban kampongs is discussed in Chapter 3 under 'Sanitation and Surveillance'.

⁶¹ Thomas H. Silcock, *A History of Economics Teaching and Graduates in Singapore* (Singapore: Department of Economics and Statistics, National University of Singapore, 1985), pp. 62-63.

⁶² OHC, interview with Lim Kim San, 13 Feb 1985; *ST*, 22 Jul 2006. Lim received no salary for his work with the HDB and frequently called himself a volunteer.

⁶³ Han Fook Kwang, Warren Fernandez & Sumiko Tan, *Lee Kuan Yew: The Man and his Ideas* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings and Times Editions, 1998), p. 334.

⁶⁴ Author's interview with Tay Kheng Soon, 6 Oct 2006.

⁶⁵ In his interview with the Oral History Centre in 1985, Lim spoke of his complete shock at seeing first-hand the dilapidated housing and widespread poverty among the Chinese living in the Central Area. He had grown up in a well-to-do family. OHC, interview with Lim Kim San, 13 Feb 1985.

⁶⁶ Lee Kuan Yew, *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 1998), pp. 333-44. Lee also related an anecdote of a disagreement between Lim Kim San

HDB partially to oppose Ong, his immediate superior, whom he characterised as a ‘megalomaniac’ and ‘rabble-rouser’.⁶⁷ The challenge of achieving tangible housing targets was consequently something Lim could relate to as a businessman. ‘Within a year, the building is up’, Lim recalled, ‘The HDB was so interesting and I so thoroughly enjoyed it, that it became full-time’.⁶⁸ His business background was also invaluable because Goh Keng Swee wanted to ensure that the money given to the Board for housing the people would be well spent.⁶⁹ Lim found that ‘money was no problem. Any money I wanted, I was given a free hand in the spending of money’.⁷⁰ Lim in turn recruited Howe Yoon Chong, a senior civil servant in the Public Service Commission and an Economics graduate from the University of Malaya, to liaise between the HDB and the Ministry of National Development but especially to communicate with the Board’s officers.⁷¹ Howe was another ‘no-nonsense guy’ who understood the challenge of achieving tangible results,⁷² and quickly obtained the nickname ‘Bulldozer’ for his single-minded determination to overcome red tape in pursuing government projects.⁷³

The HDB management hurriedly recruited a group of young architects and planners.⁷⁴ Lim Kim San had found the early HDB staff afflicted by low morale and a ‘sense of persecution’, because, he claimed, Ong Eng Guan had planted his own ‘cronies’ and ‘spies’.⁷⁵ Lim removed most, though not all, of Ong’s men and recruited young architects who had been trained in Australia and returned to Singapore between 1959 and 1965. Lim acknowledged later that ‘anybody with a degree in engineering, in architecture, we grabbed; degree or diploma’.⁷⁶ Because

and Ong Eng Guan, who wanted to bypass the local contractors and hire construction workers for HDB projects directly. But Lim was only concerned to finish the housing project within the stipulated time. Ong had wanted to win over the construction workers’ union, which decried the contractor system as exploitative and wanted labour to be directly employed. Lee overruled Ong and supported Lim. Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MOF Finance, 26 Jan 1961; Singapore, *Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Constructional Capacity of Singapore*, p. 10.

⁶⁷ Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 163.

⁶⁸ Chew, *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 163.

⁶⁹ Lee, *The Singapore Story*, pp. 333–44.

⁷⁰ OHC, interview with Lim Kim San, 13 Feb 1985.

⁷¹ OHC, interview with Lim Kim San, 13 Feb 1985.

⁷² Author’s interview with Tay Kheng Soon, 6 Oct 2006.

⁷³ *ST*, 23 Aug 2007.

⁷⁴ Lim Kim San and Howe Yoon Chong themselves were relatively young, being 44 and 37 years old respectively in 1960.

⁷⁵ OHC, interview with Lim Kim San, 13 Feb 1985.

⁷⁶ SBC, audio-visual programme *Diary of a Nation: Homes for Our People*, 12 Feb 1964, broadcast in 1988. According to Lim Kim San, the HDB was so desperate to recruit new officers to replace the

Australian architectural ideas were received second-hand from Britain and the United States and were consequently less experimental, the Australia-trained architects were more predisposed to build the low-cost emergency housing which the PAP government desired. Some of the architects had also been politically-active in Australia and subscribed to a form of socialism which was materialist in nature and coincided with the PAP's low-cost housing policy. They were, in short, 'intensely practical people, and they were no-nonsense, no human rights, "let's get on with the job"'.⁷⁷

Teh Cheang Wan, born in 1928, had been active in Sydney University's left-leaning Socialist Club. Upon his graduation in 1956, Teh had worked briefly for the Public Works Department and the Housing Commission of the New South Wales government, and in the Federal Housing Trust and the Penang City Council in Malaya before joining the SIT's Building Department in August 1959.⁷⁸ A firm PAP supporter, he became the HDB's Chief Architect when the Board was formed half a year later. Teh, like his superiors, believed whole-heartedly in the need to replace unauthorised wooden housing with modern housing; he reputedly coined the inside phrase, 'You cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs'.⁷⁹ Alan Choe, born in 1931 and a graduate of Melbourne University with a postgraduate diploma in Town and Regional Planning, became the HDB's first architect-planner. Ng Chee Sen, born in 1924, the Board's Senior Architect, had also been educated at the University of Melbourne and had been a close associate of Ong Eng Guan in the SIT.⁸⁰ Another of Ong's associates who played an important role in the campaign against unauthorised wooden housing was Ho Pak Toe, also from Melbourne University, where he had acquired a reputation for being 'pink' in his political orientation.⁸¹ Ho

SIT staff who had resigned that, in interviewing prospective candidates, they merely asked simple questions like, 'Do you have a diploma? Are you a qualified architect? You are? Join us!' Chew, interview with Lim Kim San, in *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 164.

⁷⁷ Tay Kheng Soon, 'The Architecture of Rapid Transformation', in Kernial S. Sandhu & Paul Wheatley (eds), *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1989), p. 862; author's interview with Tay Kheng Soon, 6 Oct 2006; and author's interview with William Lim, 25 Oct 2006. According to William Lim, who received his architectural training in Britain and the United States, it was in these two countries that cutting-edge architecture was being taught.

⁷⁸ A2998/1, Telegram Ref. No. 51/4300, 11 Apr 1957.

⁷⁹ Author's interview with Tay Kheng Soon, 6 Oct 2006.

⁸⁰ Author's interview with Alan Choe, 27 Nov 2006. Ong Eng Guan was an accountancy graduate from Melbourne University.

⁸¹ Author's interview with Tay Kheng Soon, 6 Oct 2006.

became the Chief Building Surveyor of the Public Works Department, overseeing the approval of building plans and taking action against unauthorised buildings. Chee Teck Chiang, born in 1932, and Chu Pak Chow, the Board's freshly-recruited assistant architects, were also Melbourne graduates.⁸²

With its robust, hard-headed leadership and forward-looking young architects and planners, the HDB was well-suited to implement the government's housing plan. Lim Kim San, delegated the Board's executive authority, viewed the SIT's subcommittees as time-wasting and abolished them. He was unchallenged to the extent that he could claim, 'I'm the Committee'.⁸³ Lim knew how to organise the youthful talent at his disposal, understanding that young people liked to have a sense of responsibility.⁸⁴ Alan Choe found his superiors 'really dynamic', who 'knew what they wanted. They were not scared that they had no experience but they had the conviction that they would be able to carry it through'.⁸⁵ In addition, according to William Lim, a contemporary architect, both Lim and Teh Cheang Wan understood the contractual side of housing.⁸⁶ Lim realised that the contractors and suppliers of material 'must be paid promptly and then they will do business with you and they will give you the best prices available'.⁸⁷ As Liu Thai Ker, later the Chief Architect of the HDB, explained, Teh was also 'a great strategist', who 'had a mind of the businessman, an entrepreneur. So he was resourceful in finding ways to deliver what the government expected of him. And he related very well with contractors'.⁸⁸

The HDB staff's lack of practical experience was, in Alan Choe's words, a case of 'the blind leading the blind'.⁸⁹ This apparent inadequacy, however, was actually useful for building the maximum number of low-cost housing units in

⁸² Author's interview with Chee Teck Chiang, 31 Jul 2007. Chee had joined the HDB because the private sector then was quiet.

⁸³ Chew, interview with Lim Kim San, in *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 164.

⁸⁴ OHC, interview with Lim Kim San, 13 Feb 1985.

⁸⁵ OHC, interview with Alan Choe, 1 Jul 1997; author's interview with Alan Choe, 27 Nov 2006.

⁸⁶ Author's interview with William Lim, 25 Oct 2006.

⁸⁷ OHC, interview with Lim Kim San, 13 Feb 1985.

⁸⁸ Author's interview with Liu Thai Ker, 14 Dec 2006.

⁸⁹ Among the pioneer architects recruited to the HDB in Aug 1960, Teh Cheang Wan, 32, had only three years of practical experience. Ng Chee Seng, 36, had five and a half years, while Chee Teck Chiang, 27, had none. HB 188/59, Supplementary List of Professional Staff as at 1 Aug 1960; and Details of Professional Staff as at 1 Aug 1960.

record time. The ease of building standardised housing, Lim Kim San explained, was ‘that we could more or less turn it out like in an assembly line’.⁹⁰ Chee Teck Chiang, a fresh architectural graduate, agreed that ‘we were given a guideline – 1-room, 2-room, 3-room – the size of the unit, and the type of the materials we were allowed to use, and the structure was usually concrete, so it was very straightforward’.⁹¹ Alan Choe, who had only six months’ prior experience in minor architectural work in Australia, concurred that with low-cost housing, ‘you are talking about purely functional needs. All architectural trimmings and fanciful things are out of your mind’. Most importantly, Choe understood that the clearance of the urban kampongs was necessary for the planned development of Singapore:

If you are a government or a planner, you know that when you want to upgrade a country, you cannot leave pockets of slums here and there. You can leave it if it is out of your path of growth. But it’s a matter of time....so you will prioritise your clearance of squatter areas and slums according to the path of growth. If it’s in the growth belt...you cannot put through your infrastructure, your roads, and offer sites for development, unless the site is cleared.⁹²

‘A God-sent opportunity’: Emergence of Bukit Ho Swee Estate

In practice, however, the actual clearance of unauthorised wooden housing on the urban fringe was as deeply problematic for the HDB as it had been for the SIT. In October 1960, Lim Kim San, identifying clearance as his top priority, asked Goh Keng Swee for ‘close liaison with your Assemblymen as well as strong political backing’.⁹³ Under the State Development Plan, the HDB aimed to redevelop 1,300 acres of land within five miles of the Central Area. It targeted the construction of 7,832 units in Queenstown, MacPherson, St. Michael’s, and on the Tiong Bahru fire and cemetery sites at a cost of \$34.1 million in 1961, 9,735 units in

⁹⁰ SBC, audio-visual recording titled *Diary of a Nation: Homes for Our People*, 12 Feb 1964, broadcast in 1988.

⁹¹ Author’s interview with Chee Teck Chiang, 31 Jul 2007.

⁹² OHC, interview with Alan Choe, 1 Jul 1997; author’s interview with Alan Choe, 27 Nov 2006.

⁹³ HB 999/48 Vol. I, Memo from Chairman, HDB, to Minister of Finance, 11 Oct 1960.

Queenstown, Farrer Park and Kallang in 1962 (\$40.7 million), 9,690 units in Toa Payoh in 1963 (\$33.8 million), 12,750 units in Toa Payoh, MacPherson and Thomson in 1964 (\$44.5 million), and 11,760 units in Toa Payoh, MacPherson and Covent Garden in 1965 (\$44.1 million).⁹⁴ The building work would be concentrated in the more peripheral northern and eastern parts of the City in Queenstown and Toa Payoh,⁹⁵ the latter envisaged as a massive satellite town with 50,000 flats and a population of 300,000.⁹⁶ In 1960, the HDB continued to remove kampong dwellers from the Queenstown area and also established a committee to coordinate the clearance of Toa Payoh.⁹⁷ But kampong dwellers quickly began to make representations to the Ministry of National Development in protest.⁹⁸ Kampongs closer to the Central Area like Bukit Ho Swee were even more difficult to clear. As Teh Cheang Wan indicated in a memorandum in 1960, housing development in the City was also hindered by the high cost of land and the need to carry out piling on most such sites. Teh worried that 'unless some solution is found, the development of housing in the central areas for the very low-income groups without Government subsidy is virtually impossible'.⁹⁹

The acquisition of land at the margins of the City became a serious stumbling block. Under the Housing and Development Board Ordinance, the HDB had replaced the Land Office as the authority responsible for land acquisition. By late 1960, the Board warned that it would soon use up all the vacant lands available for construction except for 135 acres of small, heavily encumbered and unsuitable sites. It stressed the urgency of acquiring a further 1,000 acres, given the 'patent need for small central area sites and larger areas of land at the perimeter of the town for extensive housing development'.¹⁰⁰ In October, the Board established a Housing Sites Committee to study the possibility of acquiring small sites under both public and private ownership, such as Crown land at Henderson Road and cemeteries in

⁹⁴ SLAD, 12 Apr 1961, pp. 1282-83.

⁹⁵ MOF, *State of Singapore Development Plan, 1961-1964*, p. 121-23.

⁹⁶ SLAD, 24 May 1961, pp. 1467-68.

⁹⁷ HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, pp. 26, 34-35.

⁹⁸ HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 31.

⁹⁹ HB 1045/53, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Lands Manager, HDB, 5 Oct 1960.

¹⁰⁰ HB 1045/53, Draft memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MOF, undated, c. 1960; HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, pp. 17, 24.

Bukit Merah and Buona Vista.¹⁰¹ J. W. Hill, the Lands Manager, was confident about acquiring 300-400 acres of land per year but uncertain whether there were sufficient funds for the purchases.¹⁰² By that time, the Board was intent on extending the development of the Tiong Bahru cemetery site; the Committee had marked out several plots of land in Bukit Ho Swee for future acquisition: Lots 62-11 (12 acres of private land), 63-19 (40,000 square feet) and 61-17 (150,000 square feet of Crown land located between Nos. 549-588 Havelock Road).¹⁰³

The HDB consequently experienced a slow start to its building project. By April 1961, just before the outbreak of the Bukit Ho Swee fire, the Board had built only 2,112 units of housing in the 14 months since its inception, not overly-impressive compared to the SIT's average of 2,200 units per year.¹⁰⁴ It was in this context of an intractable clearance problem that the Bukit Ho Swee inferno took place. Two days before the fire, the HDB had decided to expand its low-cost building programme for the second half of the year to 5,674 self-contained and 2,448 emergency flats.¹⁰⁵ The May 1961 fire provided the perfect opportunity to accomplish these targets and shift the building programme into a higher gear. The blaze had cleared the 'squatters' in an instant, while the scale of the calamity had given the government the moral authority to acquire the land at low cost. Lee Kuan Yew's pledge to build permanent homes on the fire site within nine months was not a haphazard promise but a calculated risk based on the potential strength of the HDB: namely, the building of the maximum number of standardised units of housing in minimal time by a determined group of managers and architects. When Lee asked Lim Kim San how long it would take to rebuild Bukit Ho Swee, Lim, who had been advised by Teh Cheang Wan, had replied without hesitation, 'Nine months'.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, what the British Commission viewed as a 'crash plan'¹⁰⁷ to redevelop Bukit Ho Swee enjoyed firm public support. The enormity of the disaster

¹⁰¹ HB 1045/53, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, to Financial Officer, HDB, 6 Mar 1961; HB 1045/53, Minutes of Board Meeting, 14 Oct 1960; HDB, *Annual Report 1960*, p. 24.

¹⁰² HB 1045/53, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, to CEO, HDB, 15 Jun 1961.

¹⁰³ HB 1045/53, Memo by Lands Manager, HDB, 7 Oct 1960.

¹⁰⁴ SIT, *Annual Report 1959*, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ HB 16/59 Vol. I, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 23 May 1961.

¹⁰⁶ Chew, interview with Lim Kim San, in *Leaders of Singapore*, p. 165; OHC, interview with Lim Kim San, 13 Feb 1985.

¹⁰⁷ CO 1030/1597, Memo titled 'Public Housing in Singapore' by the UK Commission, 16 Apr 1963.

forged a collective social will to support a popularly-elected government towards transforming the landscape of 'Old Singapore'. The *Nanyang Siang Pau* stated that the political leadership should 'shoulder this responsibility to build many houses for the ordinary people and give them priority in applying for them'.¹⁰⁸ It was necessary, the newspaper urged, in order to stop the proliferation of unauthorised wooden housing:

Let us remember permanently the lesson of the fire on the minimum standards for the construction of houses and the basic conditions for designing the houses....Now we can understand why the Ministry of National Development opposes the construction of unauthorised structures.¹⁰⁹

The *Sin Chew Jit Poh* also fully supported the government's campaign against unauthorised housing.¹¹⁰ The *Straits Times*, which had been critical of the PAP before the elections but was now 'meekly endorsing' ministerial statements, lauded the government's acquisition of the fire site as the sole consolation in the calamity.¹¹¹ It also stated that '[w]e do not want this valuable land once more locked by squatters or permitted to develop again into a fire trap'.¹¹² What was at stake, the paper emphasised, was not merely the threat of future fires but the need to clearly define the responsibilities of a good citizen:

The observance of law and regulations is the first lesson for the citizens and an important condition for community life. It is hoped that all citizens will cultivate a good civic habit and refrain from building unauthorised houses for their own convenience, thus marring the look of the city and sowing the cause for future fires.¹¹³

¹⁰⁸ *NYSP*, 26 May 1961.

¹⁰⁹ *NYSP*, 1, 15 Jun 1961.

¹¹⁰ *SCJP*, 8 Jun 1961.

¹¹¹ CO 1030/562, Despatch from British Commissioner to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 7 Sep 1959; Ong Chit Chung, *The 1959 Singapore General Elections*, unpublished academic exercise, Department of History, University of Singapore, 1973, p. 35.

¹¹² *ST*, 2 Jun 1961.

¹¹³ *NYSP*, 15 Jun 1961.

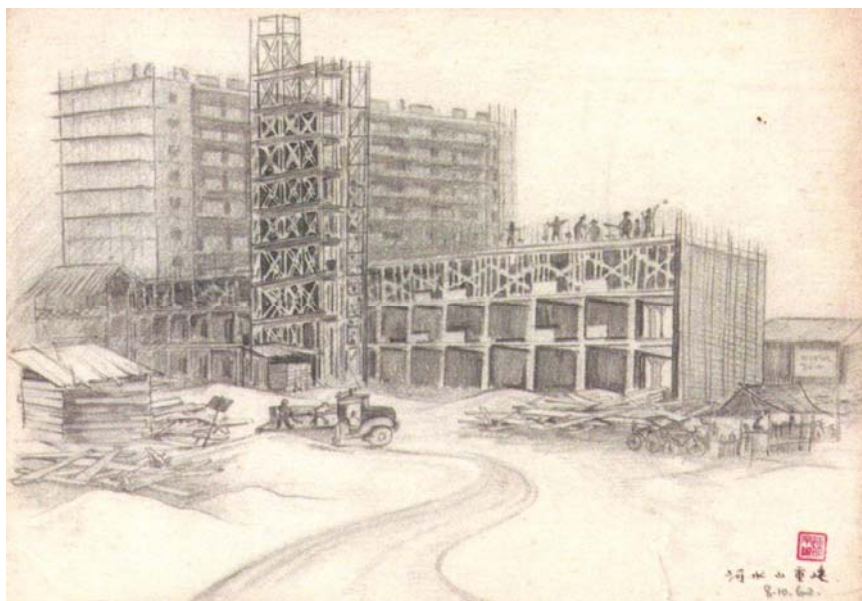


Plate 8.1: A sign of the widespread social support for the PAP government's emergency rehousing programme for the victims of the Bukit Ho Swee fire. Artist Tan Choo Kuan's impression of the rapid rebuilding of the fire site, illustrated by three housing blocks in different stages of construction (Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore).

Still, Lee Kuan Yew's promise of nine months was a major gamble, since building a multi-storey housing block normally took ten to fourteen months.¹¹⁴ The building of what was planned to be a 'mini-town' consisted of four main building phases between 1961 and 1965.¹¹⁵ The first project, already advanced at the time of the fire, was the Tiong Bahru cemetery site scheme, renamed Bukit Ho Swee Phase I after the fire (see Map 8.1).¹¹⁶ The scheme aimed to build 904 1-room, 240 2-room and 200 3-room semi-communal flats with shared bathrooms, toilets and kitchens in two contracts at a cost of \$2.3 million. Phase II involved the fire site proper, primarily Kampong Tiong Bahru and the southern half of Beo Lane, where 1,668 1-room, 636 2-room and 576 3-room self-contained flats with their own bathrooms, toilets and kitchens were to be built at a cost of \$6.9 million. The first two contracts of Phase II were scheduled for completion by July and November 1962 respectively. Phase III comprised 3,322 flats on the northern portion of Beo Lane, the area above

¹¹⁴ CO 1030/1597, Memo titled 'Public Housing in Singapore' by the UK Commission, 16 Apr 1963.

¹¹⁵ HB 130/59, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 15 May 1962.

¹¹⁶ ST, 7 Sep 1961. Previously named the Tiong Bahru Cemetery Site Phases I & II. The scheme was renamed because the term 'cemetery' was allegedly 'unpopular to many people'. HB 932/57, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Lands Manager, HDB, 9 Sep 1961.

Delta Estate, and the area south of Tiong Bahru Road flanked by Jalan Membina, while a further 1,715 flats were to be built on Phase IV.¹¹⁷

For a considerable time, the housing programme was bogged down by the protracted process of acquiring the fire site. Three weeks after the inferno, 39½ acres of the site had been gazetted for housing and was in the process of being ‘urgently’ acquired for an estimated amount of \$700,600, with 14 acres of Crown land in the vicinity also to be redeveloped.¹¹⁸ The Board planned to make inquiries for the acquisition in June-July 1961, issue the awards in July-August and complete the acquisitions ‘within 3-4 months if possible’.¹¹⁹ However, the low compensation values offered under the amended Land Acquisition Ordinance hampered the clearance effort. In October-November, four landowners were still disputing the HDB’s offer of compensation and wanted their cases referred to the High Court, forcing the Board to review its original offers.¹²⁰ The acquisition of the whole fire site had yet to be completed by May 1962,¹²¹ and as late as October, leaving the HDB concerned that ‘the acquisition cost for Bukit Ho Swee Fire Site had not yet been worked out and therefore no provision had been made for the acquisition of the site’.¹²²

The clearance of the remaining buildings on and near the fire site was also proving difficult, while demonstrating how the blaze had been a blessing in disguise by levelling most of Bukit Ho Swee. In October 1961, the HDB conducted a census of these buildings ahead of evicting the residents and rehousing them in Board accommodation. By December, however, a total of 10 and 25 families on Phase I and II sites respectively had rejected the Board’s offers of rehousing.¹²³ On 3 May, Teh Cheang Wan emphasised that ‘the clearance of the remaining sites in Bukit Ho Swee, MacPherson Road (South), Alexandra Hill Cemetery Site, Erskine Hill etc.

¹¹⁷ HB 842/1/52, Memo from Acting Lands Manager, HDB, to Financial Officer, HDB, 31 Aug 1962; HB 842/1/52, Amended Building Programme for 1960 and 1961 Phase 1, 5 Oct 1962; and HB 962/2/57, Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Estates Manager, HDB, 8 Jan 1962. Bukit Ho Swee Phase I was previously named Tiong Bahru Cemetery Site Phases I and II.

¹¹⁸ HB 1045/53, Details of Land Acquisition by Lands Manager, HDB, 15 Jun 1961; HB 993/50 Vol. III, Lands Department Report, May 1961.

¹¹⁹ HB 993/50 Vol. III, Lands Department Report, May 1961.

¹²⁰ HB 993/50 Vol. III, Lands Department Reports, October & November 1961.

¹²¹ HB 1013/50 Vol. I, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Chairman, HDB, 3 May 1962.

¹²² HB 16/59 Vol. II, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 5 Oct 1962.

¹²³ HB 147/51 Vol. IV, Statement of Rehousing Scheme by Estates Department, Dec 1961.

should be implemented in accordance with the time schedule for clearance or else the building programme would eventually come to a standstill'. By February 1963, all wooden buildings on Phases I and II sites which were in the path of development had been completely removed, but not without some resistance.

There were, however, still other buildings which had to be cleared in the near future: 42 cases on Phase III sites, 46 cases on Phase IV sites (mostly shophouse tenants), 28 cases on Phase V-A sites, and 58 cases on Phase V-B. Most of the families involved were holding out for cheaper accommodation nearby. The HDB planned to forcibly seize 98 out of the 174 dwellings and evict the tenants, although many of the shop cases were unable to afford the minimum rentals of Board shops.¹²⁴ At Jalan Membina and Delta Circus, there were also 141 and 25 outstanding clearance cases respectively; in the former area, the Board admitted that the clearance would be difficult, as '[u]ndesirable characters are predominant'.¹²⁵ By the end of 1963, out of the 436 families staying on Phases III-V and Delta Circus sites who had registered with the HDB for rehousing, 57 families had cancelled their registration and another 52 registered families had not yet been rehoused.¹²⁶ At the beginning of 1964, when the Board started to clear Delta Circus and the Tiong Bahru sewerage works,¹²⁷ three small pockets of wooden houses continued to delay the construction of 1,000 flats and two schools.¹²⁸ Half of the 28 cases remaining on Phase III sites had built unauthorised wooden houses, which the Board proceeded to demolish. There were also seven outstanding cases in the path of the road-widening project at Jalan Membina.¹²⁹ By February, the two wooden houses which still remained standing there had become 'more than an embarrassment' to the Board.¹³⁰ In the following month, the rate of clearance of the outstanding houses and factories was still very unsatisfactory; the Kwong Joo Seng Sauce Factory at Beo Lane, due to

¹²⁴ HB 1013/50 Vol. I, Memo from Administrative Officer, Resettlement, HDB, to CEO, HDB, 15 Feb 1963; and Annex titled 'Projects Delayed by Squatters as at 3 Oct 1962', in Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 12 Oct 1962.

¹²⁵ HB 1013/50 Vol. I, Annex titled 'Projects Delayed by Squatters as at 3 Oct 1962', in Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 12 Oct 1962.

¹²⁶ HB 147/51 Vol. V, Statement of Rehousing Scheme by Estates Department, Dec 1963.

¹²⁷ HB 1013/50 Vol. I, Memo from Director, Public Works, to PS, MND, 5 Dec 1963.

¹²⁸ HB 1013/50 Vol. I, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Chairman, HDB, 4 Jan 1964.

¹²⁹ HB 1013/50 Vol. I, Memo from Administrative Officer, Resettlement, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 25 Jan 1964.

¹³⁰ HB 1013/50 Vol. I, Memo from Senior Civil Engineer, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 21 Feb 1964.

be cleared by the end of 1963, was still delaying the construction of two secondary schools.¹³¹ The HDB was ‘informed that this site will be cleared by the Resettlement Department by 31st March 1964’ without further delay.¹³² By the end of the month, the sauce factory, a key social symbol of the kampong and source of employment before the fire, finally vacated its premises, together with the remaining wooden house dwellers in the vicinity.¹³³

Set against the background of this context, for former dwellers of Bukit Ho Swee whose houses had survived the fire, insecurity of residency became a dominant frame of mind in their experiences. Wang Ah Tee’s family of eleven reluctantly moved into a 2-room HDB flat in Bukit Ho Swee Estate after their wooden house was demolished after the fire. The family did not want to leave but, as Wang explained, ‘我们没有路可以走了’ [‘We had no other roads to walk’].¹³⁴ Peter Lim, whose house in Beo Lane had miraculously survived the flames, endured the relentless booming sounds of piling in the following weeks. However, they were finally evicted in 1963 without any compensation or priority for an HDB flat but managed to find an SIT apartment in Prinsep Street in the Central Area.¹³⁵ Soh Boon Quee’s family, evicted from Kampong Silat, was given priority for a 1-room flat in Tiong Bahru.¹³⁶ Similarly, Roy Chan’s family returned to 585 Havelock Road for a time but was evicted within several years with little compensation, by which time they had acquired a 3-room flat in Bukit Ho Swee.¹³⁷ My father’s wooden house facing the foot of Ma Kau Thiong was demolished to make way for road works in the late-1960s, after which his family, including his parents, moved into a 3-room flat in Block 29, Havelock Road; he was happy to be living in a modern flat.¹³⁸

¹³¹ HB 1013/50 Vol. I, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to CEO, HDB, 18 Mar 1964.

¹³² HB 16/59 Vol. I, Memo from Secretary, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 23 Mar 1964.

¹³³ ME 1129/62, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Director of Education, 6 Apr 1964. The factory was relocated to Tanglin Halt Industrial Estate.

¹³⁴ Author’s interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007. The new blocks of flats in Bukit Ho Swee Estate were initially unnumbered.

¹³⁵ Author’s interview with Peter Lim, 8 Feb 2007.

¹³⁶ Author’s interview with Soh Boon Quee, 4 Feb 2007.

¹³⁷ Author’s interview with Roy Chan, 2 Apr 2007.

¹³⁸ Author’s interviews with Loh Tian Ho, 13 Jan 2006 & 2 Feb 2006.



Plate 8.2: Roy Chan with author at Jalan Bukit Ho Swee, 2007 (Photograph by author).

From a historical perspective, however, the Bukit Ho Swee inferno had clinically accomplished most of the clearance work. The on-site building activity was feverish in the aftermath of the fire; within a week, a preliminary plan to redevelop the fire site had already been prepared.¹³⁹ ‘The moment the fire site had been cleared’, Alan Choe recalled, ‘Plans were made in record time to rebuild on the site’.¹⁴⁰ According to Chee Teck Chiang, who helped to implement the plans, the HDB architects ‘moved very fast. We didn’t spend much time discussing this or that’.¹⁴¹ Lim Kim San revealed that the HDB made Bukit Ho Swee its top priority:

The fire in Bukit Ho Swee cleared a large area of timber and other light structures, thus making it possible and advantageous to put in hand immediate development of this area. Extensive building at Bukit Ho Swee therefore took emergency priority over some earlier approved projects and work at this site is making good progress.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ HB 99/48 Vol. II, Report of the Building Department, May 1961.

¹⁴⁰ OHC, interview with Alan Choe, 1 Jul 1997.

¹⁴¹ Author’s interview with Chee Teck Chiang, 31 Jul 2007.

¹⁴² HB 16/59 Vol. I, Memo from Chairman, HDB, to Minister of Finance, 20 Oct 1961.

In September 1961, the four 6-storey blocks and a single 4-storey block of 904 1-room emergency flats of Phase I Contract II, built at a cost of \$1,485 each, were completed. The HDB had been increasingly anxious about the progress. The Board duly announced that the flats, partially-built at the time of the fire, had been completed one month ahead of schedule, but Tan Kia Gan had earlier stated that they would be ready in August. In fact, the flats belonged to the Tiong Bahru cemetery site project begun after the 1959 Tiong Bahru fire.¹⁴³ More than 700 of the new flats were allocated to Bukit Ho Swee fire victims. At the flats' official opening on 24 September, celebrated with fire crackers and lion- and dragon-dances, Lee Kuan Yew was cheered by the new residents when he arrived. He promised that by the end of the following year, all fire victims would be rehoused in more than 13,000 flats, mostly 1-room units at \$20 monthly rentals, built on the fire site.¹⁴⁴ Lee had subtly extended the time-frame for rehousing the fire victims from nine to nineteen months. To avoid complaints about high rents which had plagued the Tiong Bahru fire rehousing project, the HDB set the monthly rentals for the Bukit Ho Swee 1-room emergency flats at \$20,¹⁴⁵ and in January 1962 reduced the rentals of similar housing in Tiong Bahru to the same level.¹⁴⁶ The initial successful rehousing of the Bukit Ho Swee fire victims consequently was due in large part to construction which had taken place under the SIT after the 1959 Tiong Bahru fire, both at the Tiong Bahru fire and cemetery sites. The Board acknowledged this crucial connection:

Singapore has just experienced two of the worst fires in recent years, one in Kampong Tiong Bahru and the other in Bukit Ho Swee, and it is a rather ironical coincidence that the flats erected at the first fire site were completed just in time to house the victims of the second fire.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴³ HB 99/48 Vol. II, Report of the Building Department, May 1961; HDB, *Annual Report 1961*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁴⁴ *ST*, 24 Sep 1961.

¹⁴⁵ HB 1095/49 Vol. II, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Chairman, HDB, 9 Mar 1961; HB 204/3/60 Memo from PS, MND, to CEO, HDB, 2 Sep 1961. In March 1961, the government had standardised the rents of its new properties. HB 1095/49 Vol. II, Minutes of Board Meeting, 10 Mar 1961.

¹⁴⁶ HB 25/16/59, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Acting PS, MND, 17 Jan 1962.

¹⁴⁷ HDB, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 22.



Plate 8.3: The official opening of the newly-completed modern emergency housing at Ma Kau Thiong. Some of the emergency flats are already occupied (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

But the progress of the remaining contract of Phase I was slow due to the shortage of sand; it was only completed in May 1962 (see Table 8.1).¹⁴⁸ Phase II was completed in November that year, within Lee Kuan Yew's second deadline, with Phases III and IV finished only in January 1965. By the end of 1962, the HDB had built 3,732 flats in Bukit Ho Swee – more than the number of fire victim families. By 1965, more than 11,446 units of high-rise flats in slab housing blocks were standing on the former fire site and adjoining lands, now dramatically transformed into a planned, modern public housing estate. In 1963, the HDB had proudly and confidently declared,

The appearance of Bukit Ho Swee Fire Site had been completely changed from one of the most congested slums in Singapore into that of a healthy housing estate with modern community services and amenities.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ HB 99/48 Vol. II, Reports of the Building Department, Sep-Dec 1961.

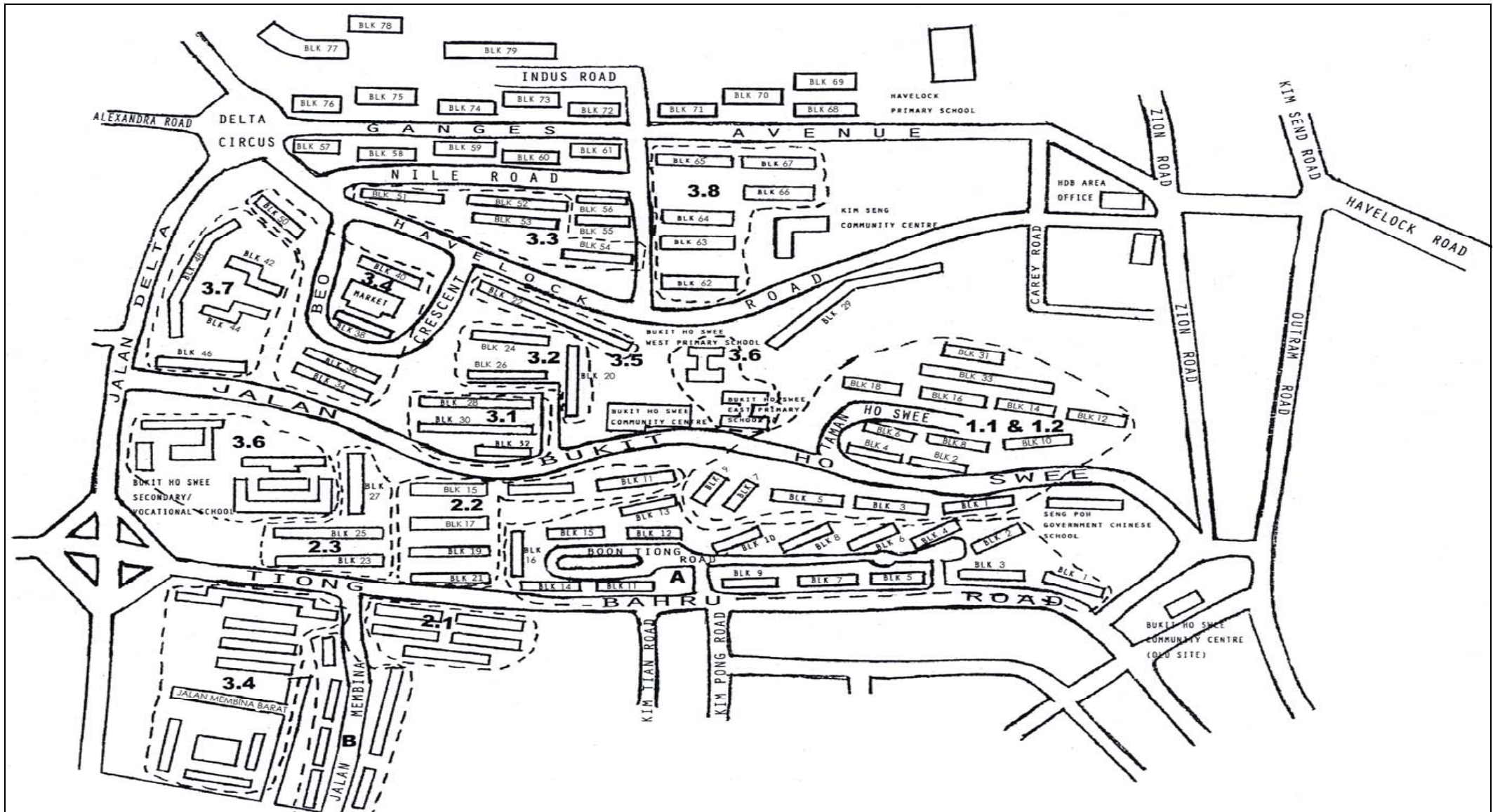
¹⁴⁹ HDB, *Annual Report 1963*, p. 28.

Table 8.1: Type and Pace of Construction of Bukit Ho Swee Estate, 1961-1967

Contract	Type	1-room	2-room	3-room	Others	Completed
Phase I Contract I 3 blocks of 9-storey flats & 2 blocks of 10-storey flats	Standard	--	240	200	8 shops	May 1962
Phase I Contract II 4 blocks of 6-storey and 1 block of 4-storey	Emergency	904	--	--	--	Sep 1961
Phase I Contract III 4 blocks of 9-storey flats	Standard	--	36	288	--	Dec 1962
Phase II Contract I 5 blocks of 6-storey emergency flats	Emergency	588	60	120	--	Mar 1962
Phase II Contract II 3 blocks of 6-storey emergency flats	Emergency	1,080	72	144	--	Nov 1962
Phase II Contract III 3 blocks of 6-storey flats	Emergency	30	--	456	--	Mar 1963
Phase III Contract I 3 blocks of 10-storey flats	Standard	--	90	240	--	May 1963
Phase III Contract II 3 blocks of 10-storey flats	Standard	--	80	388	1 clinic	Jun 1963
Phase III Contract III 3 blocks of 10-storey & 1 block of 6-storey	Standard	--	90	270	--	Jul 1963
	Emergency	264	24	24	--	
Phase III Contract IV 4 blocks of 10-storey flats	Standard	--	72	320	40 shops	Dec 1963
Phase III Contract V 1 block of 16-storey flats	Standard	--	--	280	23 shops	Apr 1964
Phase III Contract VI Market & Hawker stalls	--	--	--	--	Market & 40 stalls	Dec 1964-Jan 1965
Phase III Contract VII 1 block of 12-storey flats & 3 blocks of 10-storey flats	Standard	--	664	120	--	Dec 1963
Phase III Contract VIII 6 blocks of 6-storey emergency flats	Emergency	1,300	--	--	70 shops	Jan 1965
Phase III Contract IX	Standard	--	96	--	--	1966
Phase III Contract X	Standard	452	142	200	--	1967
Phase IV Contract I 3 blocks of 6-storey emergency flats	Emergency	1,008	--	--	--	Jan 1965
Phase IV Contract II 1 block of 12-storey flats & 2 blocks of 2-storey shops	Standard	--	--	100	25 shops	1965
Phase IV Contract III 3 blocks of 16-storey flats	Standard	--	605	2	--	1966
Total		5,626	2,271	3,152		
Emergency breakdown		5,176	156	744		
Emergency total	6,076	Grand total (flats)		11,049		

Sources: HB 99/48 Vols. II & III, Reports of the Building Department, 1961-1965; HDB, *Bukit Ho Swee Estate* (Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1967), p. 40.

Map 8.1 The Building Phases & Housing Blocks of Bukit Ho Swee Estate



Key:

A	SIT flats at Boon Tiong Road
B	SIT flats of Tiong Bahru Fire Site Scheme
C	SIT flats of Delta Estate
1.1 & 1.2	Bukit Ho Swee Phase I Contracts I & II (Tiong Bahru Cemetery Site Scheme Phases I & II)
2.1 – 2.3	Bukit Ho Swee Phase II Contracts
3.1 – 3.8	Bukit Ho Swee Phase III Contracts
	HDB flats built in the 1970s

Compiled from :

HDB, *Annual Report 1961*.

HDB, *Bukit Ho Swee Estate* (Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1967).

Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre, *Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre Official Opening Souvenir Magazine, 31st July 1982* (Singapore: Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre, 1982).

Archives & Oral History Department, Kim Seng Citizens' Consultative Committee & Bukit Ho Swee Area Office, HDB, *Emergence of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation to Progress* (Singapore: Singapore News & Publications Limited, 1983).

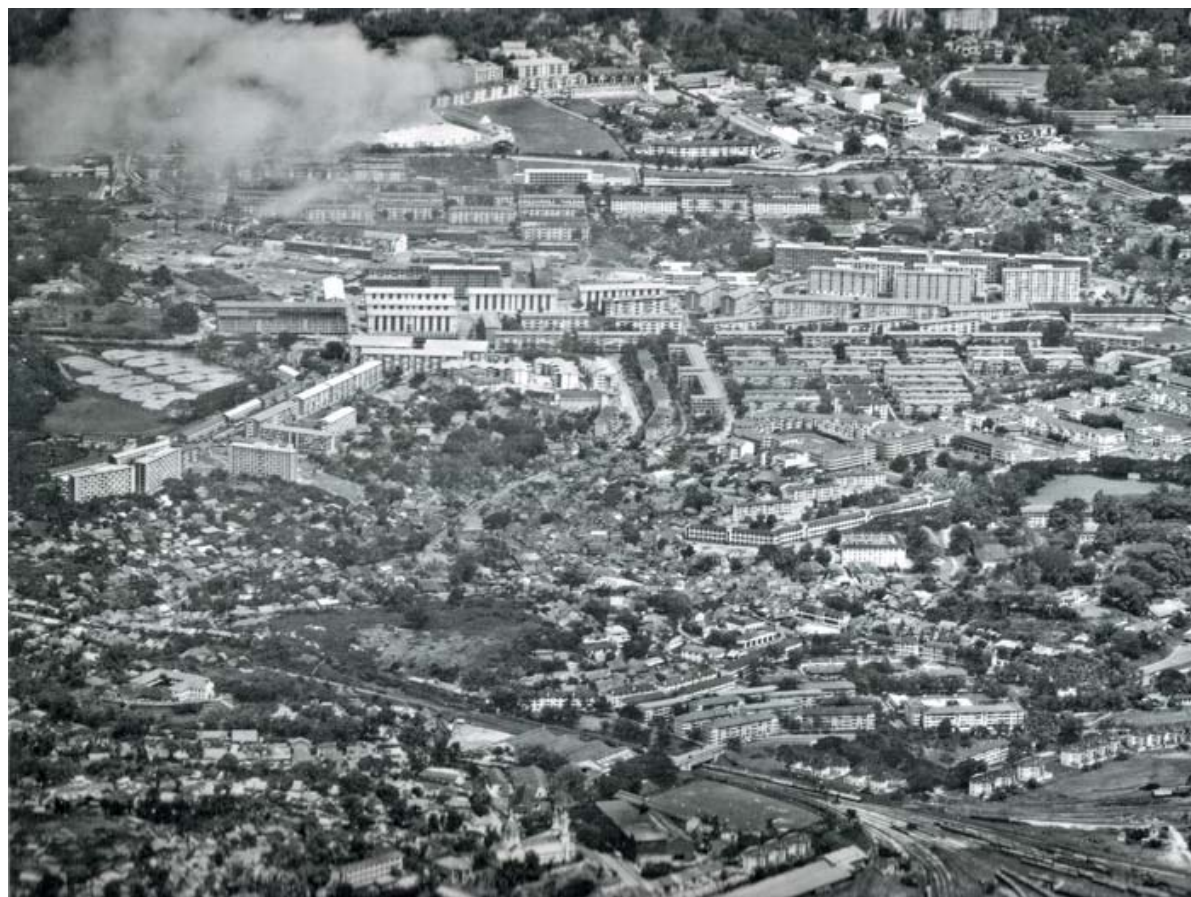


Plate 8.4: The emergence of Bukit Ho Swee Estate, November 1962. Phases I and II of the building programme, in the centre of the picture, have been completed. Construction is still ongoing in Beo Crescent. Note the wooden housing still standing in Hong Lim Pa Sat to the northeast and Si Kah Teng to the south down to the Malayan Railway. Royal Air Force, RAF Ref. No. 81/1377, November 1962 (Courtesy of Ministry of Defence).



Plate 8.5: The southern half of Bukit Ho Swee Estate, April 1963. The newly-completed emergency flats on both sides of Tiong Bahru Road (Phase II) links up with the older SIT accommodation of the Tiong Bahru fire site scheme, and the Boon Tiong Road and Tiong Bahru Estate housing. The Tiong Bahru sewerage works on the left are being demolished to make way, in part, for Kai Min Primary School. Royal Air Force, RAF Ref. No. 81/1439, April 1963 (Courtesy of Ministry of Defence).



Plate 8.6: A picture of Bukit Ho Swee Estate taken from the direction of Delta Estate, year unknown, showing Beo Crescent and Havelock Road. The estate's dominant building, in the left centre of the picture, is the long slab of 16-storey flats, Block 22. The block towers over, to its right, the partially obscured MCA shophouse (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

The overriding concern with building flats meant that the provision of social amenities lagged behind. Lim Kim San admitted that the original plan was ‘sheer housing’, where ‘no artistic license was given to the architect’.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, Alan Choe conceded that because ‘all we were interested in were the number of units and the time of completion’, the Bukit Ho Swee project was ‘not a good plan’, with too many people crowded into a small housing estate which lacked social amenities.¹⁵¹ It was only in 1964 that a shopping centre, a large children’s playground and a market at Beo Crescent for 150 stalls were completed, with two more playgrounds to be built the following year in Beo Crescent and Nile Road.¹⁵² Still, Lim Chong Keat emphasised the need to build more communal and commercial amenities and parking facilities in the estate.¹⁵³

The gradual development of social amenities in Bukit Ho Swee Estate drew the population firmly within the official orbit. In 1963, the HDB built a crèche, run by the Social Welfare Department.¹⁵⁴ The crèche, which was to encourage homemakers to take up factory and other types of regular employment, aimed to forge the nuclear family into a functioning economic unit to contribute to the nation’s development. As a social worker explained, it was also a means of training young children and

prevent children from falling lower and becoming worse. You see, a child can smoke a cigarette like an adult and walk like a gangster! This is a bad habit. They can swear, having learnt the words from outside. If they are not happy at home, they can beat up their brothers and sisters.¹⁵⁵

Similarly, the Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre, completed in 1965 and managed by the People’s Association, sought to transform the *pai kia* into ‘loyal and efficient

¹⁵⁰ OHC, interview with Lim Kim San, 13 Feb 1985.

¹⁵¹ Author’s interview with Alan Choe, 27 Nov 2006.

¹⁵² *SLAD*, 12 Nov 1964, pp. 335-36.

¹⁵³ HB 267/64, Memo from Secretary, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 28 Aug 1964.

¹⁵⁴ HB 149/10/61, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Director, SWD, 12 May 1962;

¹⁵⁵ RCS, audio programmes titled *Opening Of Bukit Ho Swee Crèche*, broadcast on 8 Aug 1963, and *This, Our Singapore: Social Welfare*, broadcast on 21 Aug 1963.

young people to collectively shoulder the responsibility in nation-building'.¹⁵⁶ The registration and movement of local hawkers also came under official regulation. In October 1963, 88 covered hawkers' pitches were completed to accommodate the itinerant hawkers congregating in large numbers along Jalan Bukit Ho Swee.¹⁵⁷ In 1966, a 2-storey hawker centre was built at Beo Crescent at the foot of a block of 2-room flats, containing 80 stalls selling cooked food on the ground floor, and 91 stalls selling dried goods on the first floor, with the priority of rent given to hawkers living in the estate. At the hawker centre's opening, the Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of National Development enthused that hawkers would no longer be a cause of traffic obstruction or a health hazard but could now 'do their business in sheltered comfort', while the residents could 'enjoy the many varieties of cooked food in clean, sanitary surroundings'.¹⁵⁸

The protracted and ultimately futile attempts to rebuild Kai Kok Public School demonstrated clearly how another key aspect of social life in the former 'black area' – Chinese-medium education – was brought under firm government control after the fire.¹⁵⁹ Admittedly, both Kai Kok and the nearby Chuen Min Public School were already receiving financial assistance from the PAP government in the form of grants-in-aid before the fire but a far greater degree of official control was subsequently exercised.¹⁶⁰ After the inferno, Kai Kok's school management sought the Ministry of Education's help to rebuild the school,¹⁶¹ to which request the authorities professed to be supportive.¹⁶² As an interim measure, the Ministry granted the school the use of premises at the newly-completed Outram Primary School for the rest of 1961 and at Delta West Primary School throughout the following year.

¹⁵⁶ RCS, audio programme titled *First Anniversary Celebrations Of Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre*, broadcast on 7 May 1966.

¹⁵⁷ HB 433/46 Vol. II, Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Acting Estates Manager, HDB, 9 Mar 1963.

¹⁵⁸ RCS, audio programme titled *Opening Of New Hawker Centre At Bukit Ho Swee*, broadcast on 26 Mar 1966.

¹⁵⁹ In Dec 1959, Kai Kok School requested for a site to rebuild the school from the Ministry of Education but was unsuccessful. ME 913/57, Letter from Director of Education, MOE, to Principal, Kai Kok Public School, 4 Feb 1960.

¹⁶⁰ ME 2271/57, Memo from Lands Manager, HDB, to Director of Education, MOE, 3 Jul 1961; ME 2421/57, Letter from Registrar of Schools to Principal, Chuen Min Public School, 13 Nov 1957.

¹⁶¹ NYSP, 27 May 1961.

¹⁶² NYSP, 28 May 1961.

However, the Kai Kok management's attempts to find a suitable site in Bukit Ho Swee for the school clashed with the Ministry's own school-building plans. The authorities foresaw that the estate, which would house a much larger population, required more schools than the 1958 Master Plan had allocated.¹⁶³ In September 1961, the Ministry decided that vacant land at the fire site be used to build four government schools – two primary and two secondary schools.¹⁶⁴ Kai Kok and Chuen Min schools¹⁶⁵ were consequently each allocated small half-acre lots at the site of the Tiong Bahru sewerage works, which would be relocated to Ulu Pandan.¹⁶⁶ Privately, however, the Ministry was not keen to rebuild Kai Kok School and preferred to build its own Chinese-medium primary school in the estate. Its officials, by 1963, felt that the government had done enough to help Kai Kok by loaning temporary premises for its classes and that 'the school has not done enough to help itself'.¹⁶⁷ To forestall possible criticism from the Chinese community that it had flatly refused to provide land for the school, the Ministry allowed Kai Kok's students to be placed in the newly-completed, government-run Bukit Ho Swee West School (Integrated, with both Chinese and English sessions). The latter, together with its sister primary school, Bukit Ho Swee East (English-medium), which catered to a total of 4,000 students, had been completed in record time under nine months and opened for classes at the beginning of 1963.¹⁶⁸ By the end of the year, most of Kai Kok's former students had been enrolled in Bukit Ho Swee West, while its former teachers had also been recruited into government-aided Chinese schools.¹⁶⁹ In February that year, the Kai Kok management had asked to hold classes at Hua Kong School at Alexandra Road but the Ministry turned down the request on the grounds that the school could only hold 90 students.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶³ ME 2875/61, Notes of a Meeting to Discuss the Requirements of the Health and Education Ministries Relative to the Development of the Bukit Ho Swee Fire Site, 24 Aug 1961.

¹⁶⁴ ME 913/57, Memo from Minister for Education to Minister for National Development, 26 Sep 1961.

¹⁶⁵ ME 2271/57, Letter from Chairman, Chuen Min Public School Management Committee, to Prime Minister, 29 May 1961. The Chuen Min School management had also asked the government for land to rebuild, since its wooden buildings had been partially damaged in the 1959 Tiong Bahru fire.

¹⁶⁶ ME 2271/57, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to PS, MND, 9 Sep 1961.

¹⁶⁷ ME 913/57, Memo to Parliamentary Secretary, MOE, 8 Jan 1963.

¹⁶⁸ HDB, *Annual Report 1962*, p. 20.

¹⁶⁹ ME 913/57, Memo from Acting Director of Schools, MOE, to Parliamentary Secretary, MOE, 16 Oct 1962; Letter from Director of Education, MOE, to Supervisor, Kai Kok Public School, Oct 1962; and Memo from Parliamentary Secretary, MOE, to Parliamentary Secretary, MOF, 11 Feb 1963.

¹⁷⁰ Memo from Parliamentary Secretary, MOE, to Parliamentary Secretary, MOF, 11 Feb 1963.

Given the *fait accompli* in absorbing Kai Kok's students and teaching staff in government-run schools, the Ministry informed the school management in December 1964 that it would not be given a piece of land to rebuild the school, because there were already 'many primary schools and no secondary school in the Bukit Ho Swee area'.¹⁷¹ The Ministry, in fact, felt that 'it would be unwise to waste a capital grant to revive this Kai Kok School', there being no further demand for primary school places in the locality given the primary schools already built.¹⁷² This was, of course, a classic case of circular reasoning. In the meantime, the authorities vigorously pursued the building of the two secondary schools: Bukit Ho Swee Secondary School and Bukit Ho Swee Vocational School. Both schools were completed at the end of 1965 despite a poor start by the contracting firm, which had bid nearly 20% below cost and had completed only 13% of the work by the fourth month.¹⁷³ The construction finally progressed satisfactorily after the HDB, upon finding the building equipment inadequate and the workers inexperienced and guilty of numerous mistakes in their work, threatened to repossess the sites and building materials.¹⁷⁴

It was further public housing development in the locality which brought the protracted issue to a sorry end in 1967. Chuen Min School, located primarily within the Tiong Bahru fire site scheme, was ordered to vacate its premises by the end of 1966 to enable the construction of 1,000 flats.¹⁷⁵ Under the HDB's plan, 'all the slums bounded by Tiong Bahru Road, Henderson Road, Malayan Railway, Silat Road, General Hospital and our Tiong Bahru Estate will be cleared'.¹⁷⁶ By the end

¹⁷¹ ME 2271/57, Letter from Director of Education, MOE, to former Chairman, Kai Kok Public School Management Committee, 2 Dec 1964.

¹⁷² ME 2271/57, Memo from Acting Principal Assistant Secretary, MOE, to Director of Schools, MOE, 15 Jan 1965.

¹⁷³ HB 149/11/61, Memo from Secretary, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 21 Jan 1965; Memo from Contracts Officer, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 18 Jun 1964. Interestingly, the contractor, which was the lowest bidder, had initially been rejected by Teh Cheang Wan who favoured the third lowest bidder.

¹⁷⁴ HB 149/11/61, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 7 Jan 1965; Letter from Chief Architect, HDB, to Kim Thong Construction Co., 28 Dec 1964; Letter from Chief Architect, HDB, to Kim Thong Construction Co., 9 Oct 1964.

¹⁷⁵ ME 2271/57, Memo from Minister for Law & National Development to Acting Minister for Education, 30 Mar 1966; Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 22 Mar 1966.

¹⁷⁶ HB 25/59 Vol. III, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Deputy Secretary, Economic Planning Unit, 26 Jun 1967.

of May that year, the balance of the scheme had been successfully cleared.¹⁷⁷ Hurling into a shared predicament, Chuen Min and Kai Kok pragmatically merged into a single school and were thereby allocated a 1-acre site on State land at nearby Jalan Membina Barat, the site of the former Tiong Bahru sewerage works.¹⁷⁸ The schools submitted plans to build a 3-storey building with 14 classrooms. In June, the construction began, with the government bearing \$30,000 of the \$170,000 total building and equipment costs, and a further \$60,000 drawn from public donations to Kai Kok after the fire. The new school, named Kai Min Primary School, bearing one character from the original names of each school, was completed in November,¹⁷⁹ and opened for classes in January the following year. As a measure of ministerial control, Kai Min now received grants-in-aid from the government. But for all practical purposes, Kai Kok had ceased to exist.

A former kampong resident would have found Bukit Ho Swee unrecognisable in 1965. Beo Lane had been redirected into an arc as implied by its new name, Beo Crescent, while Bukit Ho Swee [road] had been removed entirely. There was now a new road running east-west through the estate named Jalan Bukit Ho Swee, completed in January 1964, with a minor road called Taman Ho Swee serving the former cemetery site. Another street, Jalan Delta (later renamed Lower Delta Road), flanked the estate's western limit south of Delta Circus. The use of the Malay terms 'Jalan' ('road') and 'Taman' ('garden') signified the government's attempt to Malayanise place and street names in the 1960s, although the public housing which dominated the roads was decidedly modern. The most obvious change to the landscape was to the skyline: the multi-storey flats clustered on land where unauthorised wooden housing had once stood: in the Beo Lane area, on both sides of Tiong Bahru and Havelock roads, at the Tiong Bahru sewage works, and on the once-vacant cemetery. Many of the shophouses which once lined the Tiong Bahru and Havelock roads were also cleared in this decade except, most prominently, the Malayan Chinese Association shophouse at Havelock Road. The flats of Bukit Ho Swee bridged a now unbroken stretch of SIT and HDB housing extending from

¹⁷⁷ HB 1013/50 Vol. II, Minutes of 1st Meeting on Resettlement Programme for 1966, 23 Feb 1966; and Minutes of 2nd Meeting on Resettlement Programme for 1966, 10 Jun 1966.

¹⁷⁸ ME 2271/57, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MOE, 3 Sep 1965.

¹⁷⁹ *SCJP*, 30 Jul 1966 & 10 Jan 1967. In 1985, the school moved to Yishun New Town. Today it is a government school known by its Mandarin name, Jiemin.

Delta Estate in the north to Tiong Bahru Estate in the south. The only wooden housing left was in Si Kah Teng and Hong Lim Pa Sat, both of which also faced imminent clearance. A further small pocket of wooden housing survived on the slopes of Ma Kau Thiong at Carey Road, behind Giok Hong Tian temple, in which direction the 1961 fire had not advanced.

End of a Fatal Experiment: The Emergency Housing of Bukit Ho Swee

Most of the Bukit Ho Swee fire victims wanted to return to the fire site. In June 1961, of the 1,162 families awaiting rehousing, the '[m]ajority want to be rehoused in [the Tiong Bahru] Cemetery Site and in localities' and were '[p]repared to wait for them'.¹⁸⁰ By the end of 1963, of the 2,600 families registered with the HDB (from a total of 2,833 families registered with the Social Welfare Department), 2,166 families had been successfully rehoused, although 333 families had cancelled their registration and there was still a balance of 101 families to be rehoused.¹⁸¹ By 1967, there were 12,562 flats in Bukit Ho Swee, nearly half of which were 1-room flats, capable of housing an estimated 75,000 people, five times the number who had previously lived in the kampong.¹⁸² The 1970 census of Singapore counted 45,066 persons in the estate, an increase of nearly 25,000 since the previous census in 1957.¹⁸³ Demographically speaking, the Bukit Ho Swee rehousing project was a major success.

Foremost in the minds of the returning fire victims was proximity to workplace, school, family, relatives and friends. These economic and social factors constituted the decisive influence on the opposing desires to return or leave. Tan Tiam Ho and his wife, Beh Swee Kim, had stayed temporarily in a wooden house in Hong Lim Pa Sat after the fire but later applied for a 3-room flat in Bukit Ho Swee for his family of seven, including his parents. They had calculated that the \$66.50 monthly rent was affordable, although his mother had been reluctant to leave behind

¹⁸⁰ HB 147/51 Vol. IV, Statements of Rehousing Scheme by Estates Department, Jun & Dec 1961.

¹⁸¹ HB 147/51 Vol. V, Statement of Rehousing Scheme by Estates Department, Dec 1963.

¹⁸² HDB *Annual Report 1967*, p. 51.

¹⁸³ P. Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970, Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1973), p. 238.

the traditional kampong lifestyle. Beh's parents also lived nearby in an HDB flat in Si Kah Teng and subsequently moved into Bukit Ho Swee.¹⁸⁴ James Seah, whose family moved into a 1-room emergency flat in Block 9, Jalan Bukit Ho Swee, was studying nearby at Delta Primary School, while his elder sisters were also working at the Singapore Steam Laundry at Delta Circus.¹⁸⁵ Lee Ah Gar's family of eight, including his parents, left their temporary HDB accommodation at Margaret Drive for a 2-room flat in Block 6, Jalan Bukit Ho Swee. They found the flat too small and rented a 1-room flat in Block 11 in the same area for Ah Gar and his father. The family was consequently split up but still resided in the same neighbourhood. For Ah Gar, a foreman with Robinsons Company in the Central Area, Bukit Ho Swee was conveniently close to his workplace. Similarly, his father, a hawker, did not want to lose his local clientele.¹⁸⁶

Return to Bukit Ho Swee was, however, at other times involuntary or, at best, *bo bian* ('no choice'). On his mother's unwillingness to move into modern housing, Tan Tiam Ho asked, 'What's there to feel? Once you stayed there, you just carried on with it. She only reflected on the difference between the old days and present day and felt sad'.¹⁸⁷ Tay Yan Woon's family of seven, who had moved temporarily to Kampong Henderson in order to continue rearing poultry, obtained a 3-room flat in Bukit Ho Swee in 1965. But the move was largely forced upon them by the redevelopment of the whole locality; Tay still felt that 'if you were living in an attap house, you could rear some livestock and your livelihood could be better. But we had no choice. We had no choice even if there was no work for us. We could only pass by each day by being thrifty'.¹⁸⁸ In October 1961, another fire victim family of ten with a monthly household income of \$150, who had lived in a 2-room flat at Kim Tian Road for five months, asked to be transferred to a 1-room flat in Bukit Ho Swee because they could not afford the \$55 monthly rent, which had to be paid in full following the cessation of the 3-month rent subsidy.¹⁸⁹ For others, as was the case in the 1959 Tiong Bahru fire, the administrative process of applying for modern housing was bewildering, akin to stepping into a totally different world. Goh Yong

¹⁸⁴ Author's interviews with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007, and Beh Swee Kim, 22 Jan 2007.

¹⁸⁵ Author's interview with James Seah, 21 Oct 2006.

¹⁸⁶ Author's interviews with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006, and Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

¹⁸⁷ Author's interviews with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007, and Beh Swee Kim, 22 Jan 2007.

¹⁸⁸ Author's interview with Tay Yan Woon, 28 Sep 2006.

¹⁸⁹ HB 178/59 Vol. I, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 26 Oct 1961.

Soo's family had applied to share a 2-bedroom flat with another family, but found to their horror upon entering the premises that what the HDB had advertised as a 2-room flat had only a living room and a single bedroom. Finding the living space far too small for two families, Goh's family moved into a 1-room flat at Block 54, Bukit Ho Swee. On the lack of official clarification of the size of the flat, Goh casually explained, 'Things were like that in those days'.¹⁹⁰

In Jacinta's Chen's small-scale survey of the Bukit Ho Swee fire victims in 1965, half of the thirty families returned to the estate, while the other fifteen remained in Kallang Estate. According to Chen, most of the families had not wished to return to wooden housing, being 'once bitten twice shy'. Whether the families returned to Bukit Ho Swee similarly depended on proximity to workplace, schools and relatives. Some families did not seek to return to Bukit Ho Swee because they found the flats were too small or the estate too noisy. Significantly, most of the returning families had lived in Bukit Ho Swee for at least five years before the fire.¹⁹¹

However, not all the families who moved into the new flats were fire victims. They included families given priority for rehousing because of demolition and eviction due to housing and industrial development and other kampong fires.¹⁹² These new official priorities signalled the changing role of the Bukit Ho Swee flats. In December 1961, for instance, two separate families formerly from the Central Area were allocated 2-room flats in Jalan Membina.¹⁹³ In September 1962, the 2- and 3-room flats of Bukit Ho Swee Phase II Contract I were reserved for families affected by the clearance of Bukit Merah for industrial and housing development.¹⁹⁴ From July 1963 onwards, the flats of Phase III Contract II were allocated, in order of priority, to evicted families from the clearance areas (particularly Havelock

¹⁹⁰ Author's interview with Goh Yong Soo, 25 Jul 2007.

¹⁹¹ Jacinta Chen Bee Lian, *Rehousing Upheaval and Readjustment*, unpublished academic exercise, Department of Social Studies, University of Singapore, 1966, pp. 81, 83-125.

¹⁹² HB 178/59 Vol. I, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 12 Oct 1961.

¹⁹³ HB 178/59 Vol. I, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 7 Dec 1961.

¹⁹⁴ HB 178/59 Vol. II, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 27 Sep 1962.

Road),¹⁹⁵ victims of the Bukit Ho Swee and Bukit Ban Kee fires and, finally, applicants on the housing register.¹⁹⁶

A sample HDB survey in 1969 found that 44% of the households had moved into the estate by choice, while 30% had been resettled from other urban or rural areas; in addition, 44% had previously stayed in a shophouse, compared to 47% in wooden housing.¹⁹⁷ Some of the newcomers undoubtedly welcomed life in the modern flats. Yap Kuai Yong and her husband, Lai Chee Lung, were delighted to leave their wooden house at Kampong Bugis, where fire was a daily cause for concern, for a 1-room flat in Block 15, Bukit Ho Swee, together with her mother-in-law and three sons.¹⁹⁸ A fifth of the households interviewed in the 1969 HDB survey had in fact moved to Bukit Ho Swee due to the fear of fire outbreaks in kampongs.¹⁹⁹ In 1964, Lim Yock Eng (born 1943) and her family were evicted from their shophouse residence in Chin Swee Road in the first phase of the HDB's urban renewal programme (discussed below) and moved into a 3-room flat in Block 22, Havelock Road, among the first tenants in the block.²⁰⁰ Similarly, in the mid-1960s, Quah Geok Hong (born 1946) and her husband left their shophouse dwelling in Jalan Kukoh close to the Central Area and bought an improved 1-room unit in Block 33, Taman Ho Swee, for about \$3,000. They had been unhappy with their former landlady who had been fussy with their use of water and electricity.²⁰¹

In August 1961, an Allocations Committee made up of HDB officials and Chan Choy Siong and other Assemblymen convened to decide on the allocation of the 1-room emergency flats of Bukit Ho Swee Phase I Contract II. Priority was given first to Bukit Ho Swee fire victim families of 4-7 persons not already living in temporary HDB accommodation but who had registered for rehousing at the

¹⁹⁵ *SLAD*, 2 Nov 1964, p. 88.

¹⁹⁶ HB 178/59 Vol. II, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 2 Jul 1963. The HDB's housing register was based on a points system, with priority given to larger families living in overcrowded premises, those whose member(s) suffered from tuberculosis, and those facing clearance from a designated slum area. In March 1962, there were 13,171 applicants on the housing register. Fire victims did not have to qualify for public housing via the points system. HB 74/1/59, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Acting PS, MND, 30 Nov 1960.

¹⁹⁷ Stephen H. K. Yeh, *Housing and Development Board Sample Household Survey*, Vol. V (Singapore: Economic Research Centre, University of Singapore: Housing and Development Board of Singapore, 1969), pp. ix, xii.

¹⁹⁸ Author's interview with Yap Kuai Yong and Lai Chee Long, 16 Jun 2007.

¹⁹⁹ Yeh, *Housing and Development Board Sample Household Survey*, Vol. V, p. 54.

²⁰⁰ Author's interview with Lim Yock Eng, 25 Jul 2007.

²⁰¹ Author's interview with Quah Geok Hong, 27 Jul 2007.

cemetery site, or to families of not more than seven persons who were living in temporary Board housing elsewhere. They were followed, in order of priority, by 1) registered Kampong Tiong Bahru fire victim families of not more than seven persons who had not yet been rehoused by the Board or who had applied for transfer from Kallang Estate; 2) registered Bukit Ho Swee fire victim families of three persons, and combined families totalling 4-7 persons; and 3) families on the housing register of not more than seven persons and earning a monthly income of \$200 and below.²⁰²

However, the HDB had not fully learnt the lesson of the Tiong Bahru fire rehousing scheme. In April 1961, the Board, recognising the unpopularity of the communal units in Tiong Bahru, had decided that all 1-room flats in future would be self-contained.²⁰³ In the Tiong Bahru flats, although not fully occupied, the Board found the toilets, shared by five families each, in ‘an extremely filthy state’.²⁰⁴ In mid-1962, the HDB admitted that the Tiong Bahru scheme demonstrated that ‘it would be fatal to build this type of [1-room] units with full communal facilities’.²⁰⁵ By August 1962, there were still vacant 1-room flats in Tiong Bahru, built a year and a half ago.²⁰⁶

Consequently, it was not surprising that the actual demand was poor for the Bukit Ho Swee 1-room emergency flats, partly because they also had communal toilets and partly because they were too small for many families. As Table 8.1 shows, more than half of the Bukit Ho Swee flats by 1965 were emergency housing, mostly 1-room units. Numerous families made requests to transfer out of the flats to the Board. In December 1961, the Allocations Committee decided that it would not register transfer applications from these families, even with larger units in the estate ready for occupation by early 1962.²⁰⁷ In February that year, to encourage the take-up rate, the HDB fixed the monthly rentals of emergency housing in Bukit Ho Swee

²⁰² HB 178/59 Vol. I, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 31 Aug 1961.

²⁰³ HB 871/57, Memo from Secretary, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 20 Apr 1961.

²⁰⁴ HB 871/57, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 13 Apr 1961.

²⁰⁵ HB 16/59 Vol. II, Memorandum from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 14 Jun 1962.

²⁰⁶ HB 871/57, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to CEO, HDB, 30 Aug 1962.

²⁰⁷ HB 178/59 Vol. I, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 7 Dec 1961.

and other estates at only \$20 (for 1-room flats), \$40 (2-room) and \$60 (3-room).²⁰⁸ In June, the Board admitted that the high take-up rate for the 1-room flats at the Tiong Bahru cemetery site was misleading, because the tenants were considered the more ‘desperate cases’ of fire victims, but many of whom were already asking to transfer to larger flats.²⁰⁹ As Table 8.2 shows, interest in the 588 1-room flats of Phase II Contract I offered to Bukit Ho Swee fire victims was so lukewarm that the Board conceded that ‘most fire victims who [are] in rent difficulties...are [still] prepared to pay more for slightly bigger flats’:²¹⁰



Plate 8.7: The 6-storey 1-room emergency flats of Block 3 along Jalan Bukit Ho Swee, year unknown (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

Table 8.2: Demand for Bukit Ho Swee Phase II Contract I Flats, 1962

Number & Type of Flat	Estimated Number of Families in Rent Arrears Interested
588 1-room	90
60 2-room	250
120 3-room	100

Source: Source: HB 16/59 Vol. II, Memorandum from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 14 June 1962.

²⁰⁸ HB 962/2/57, Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Estates Manager, HDB, 8 Jan 1962; HB 842/1/52, Memo from Acting Secretary, HDB, to Estates Manager, HDB, 22 Feb 1962; HB 204/3/60 Minutes of Board Meeting, 14 Dec 1962.

²⁰⁹ HB 16/59 Vol. II, Memorandum from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 14 Jun 1962.

²¹⁰ Similarly, in another batch of emergency housing in St. Michael’s Estate, catering to families rehoused from the Kallang Basin clearance programme with a monthly household income of under \$250, the initial take-up rate was only 107 out of 752 families. Of the families who rejected, the most important reasons given were inadequate living space (25%) and unsuitable locality (19%). Rent was a minor factor (1%). HB 871/57, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 14 Apr 1962.

In general, the supply of 1-room communal housing exceeded its demand, as Table 8.3 shows:

Table 8.3: Demand for 1-Room Communal Flats, 1962

HDB Estate	Number of Cases Registered	Number of Units to be Completed
Bukit Ho Swee	88	588
St. Michael's	473	816
Kallang	463	672
Aljunied	169	444
Alexandra Hill	53	900
Total	2,046	3,420

Source: HB 16/59 Vol. II, Memorandum from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 14 June 1962.

The HDB soon realised the stark truth: that ‘the general opinion of the public is that there is no marked improvement from moving out of a one-room cubicle in the slum area to a one-room Housing Board unit other than cleanliness’.²¹¹ In June 1962, the Board decided that no further 1-room emergency units be built except where sufficient demand existed and that existing units should be converted into 2- and 3-room flats.²¹² In the second half of the year, a rush of applications²¹³ led the Board to relax the application for 1-room flats and allow smaller families of three persons to apply.²¹⁴ Up to the end of the year, of the 15,800 applicants on the housing register, only 3,000 had applied for a 1-room flat, although the HDB had built 5,840 1-room flats out of a total of 15,669 units; in contrast, the SIT had only constructed 1,057 1-room units out of 20,917 units. The Board concluded that to avoid cramming families of five or more persons into 1-room flats, more 2- and 3-room flats had to be built.²¹⁵ Further HDB surveys in 1963 and 1964 suggested that about 85% of the 1-room applicants preferred flats in Bukit Ho Swee and Tiong Bahru, being close to the Central Area,²¹⁶ but the actual take-up rate remained low. In July 1963, the HDB’s Estates Department admitted that ‘[t]he emergency units with central corridors are very unpopular, and many applicants prefer to wait for the standard type’.²¹⁷ In December, 350 applicants for the Bukit Ho Swee 1-room flats asked to be considered instead for self-contained 1-room flats just completed in

²¹¹ HB 16/59 Vol. II, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 5 Jun 1962.

²¹² HB 16/59 Vol. II, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 14 Jun 1962.

²¹³ HB 871/57, Memo from Chairman, HDB, to Minister of Finance, 8 Apr 1963.

²¹⁴ HB 871/57, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Goh Keng Swee, 12 Oct 1964.

²¹⁵ HB 871/57, Memo from Secretary, HDB, to Chairman, HDB, 20 Nov 1962.

²¹⁶ HB 871/57, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Goh Keng Swee, 12 Oct 1964.

²¹⁷ HB 147/51 Vol. V, Statement of Rehousing Scheme by Estates Department, Jul 1963.

Tanjong Rhu, on the other side of the City.²¹⁸ In 1964, the HDB was forced to convert 140 emergency flats of Bukit Ho Swee Phase III into 70 shops.²¹⁹ Financially, the 1-room flats were also a bleeding wound for the government: their economic rents were \$33-40 but the rents charged were only \$20.²²⁰

In February 1965, the HDB finally decided to close the register for the emergency 1-room flats in Bukit Ho Swee.²²¹ The following year, the government decided to restrict 1-room emergency flats to areas further away from the Central Area and to reduce their numbers from 25% to 15% of total housing, while more standard and improved 1-room units (totalling 25%) would be built in both the Central Area and suburban areas.²²² In the same year, 175 families were seeking a transfer out of the Bukit Ho Swee Phase I building scheme of 904 1-room emergency flats, as were 15 families from the Phase II scheme of 156 2-room emergency flats and 70 families from the Phase III scheme of 744 3-room emergency flats.²²³ In December that year, Chan Choy Siong, citing the rape-cum-murder of a girl in a communal toilet in Bukit Ho Swee the previous year, asked the government to convert the first batch of 904 1-room emergency units into self-contained flats or, alternatively, to reduce their rentals, but the government rejected both suggestions as economically unsound. S. R. Dharmarajoo, the PAP Member of Parliament for Farrer Park, flatly stated that the authorities did not ‘consider human beings as human beings’.²²⁴ In June 1968, when 452 improved 1-room flats in Bukit Ho Swee were first put up for public ballot, there were only 255 applicants.²²⁵ In 1970, the government finally decided to convert the 904 1-room flats in Bukit Ho Swee into self-contained 2-room units, with the affected families temporarily

²¹⁸ HB 178/59 Vol. II, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 27 Dec 1963.

²¹⁹ HB 267/64, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 31 Oct 1964. 21 2-room and 12 3-room flats were also to be converted into 27 shops. HB 267/64, Memo from Secretary, HDB, to Chief Architect, HDB, 28 Aug 1964.

²²⁰ HB 871/57, Annex titled ‘Cost Analysis of 1-Room Units’, in Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to PS, MND, 27 Oct 1964.

²²¹ HB 178/59 Vol. III, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 23 Feb 1965. Following the closure of the register, applicants for 1-room flats were advised to apply for such housing in Toa Payoh.

²²² HB 871/57, Memo from PS, MND, to CEO, HDB, 29 Aug 1966. Improved 1-room flats had a bigger floor area (320 square feet compared to 240 square feet for an emergency flat) and was designed to allow the tenants to partition a single area of living space into a living room and a bedroom. HB 871/57, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 3 Oct 1964.

²²³ HB 339/51 Vol. II, Summary of Minutes of Allocations Committee, 9 Jun 1966.

²²⁴ *SPD*, 14 Dec 1966, pp. 618-21.

²²⁵ *ST*, 26 Jun 1968.

rehoused in Kampong Tiong Bahru, Bukit Merah and Henderson estates.²²⁶ As an indication of the unpopularity of the emergency housing, Bukit Ho Swee's population of 45,066 people in 1970 was only three-fifths of the full capacity of 75,000.

By the mid-1960s, the HDB had unveiled its Second 5-Year Plan, which aimed to improve the design of the flats and the layout of the housing estates.²²⁷ The new Plan marked the end of the HDB's controversial experiment in emergency housing, an initiative of the SIT and a product of the great kampong fires of the 1950s. The emergency flats, as an expedient rehousing measure, had pragmatically accomplished what they were meant to do: shatter the vicious cycle of proliferating unauthorised wooden housing, the unregulated migration of low-income Chinese families and the chronic outbreak of kampong infernos. However, for many tenants, living in emergency housing led to an undesired and unstable period of accommodation, often followed by relocation or even the involuntary fragmenting of families. Extended or semi-extended families who could not afford housing of suitable size were sometimes forced to split up and move into smaller flats. In June 1962, the Allocations Committee permitted large, semi-extended families to move into separate 1-room flats, partly to obtain occupants for the flats.²²⁸ A fire victim family of eleven, temporarily rehoused at Kim Tian Road (part of the Tiong Bahru fire site scheme) the previous June, obtained two 1-room flats along Tiong Bahru Road, one for the nuclear family, consisting of the husband and wife and five children, and the other for the mother, two brothers and a sister of the husband. The higher HDB rents, when compared to the rents for wooden housing, also made such flat-to-flat transfers unavoidable.²²⁹

'A planned new city will be built': The Making of Modern Singapore

²²⁶ SPD, 4 Nov 1970, pp. 284-85; HDB, *Annual Report 1970*, p. 83.

²²⁷ HB 871/57, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Building Department, HDB, 17 Feb 1966. The second plan aimed to build 60,000 units of housing between 1966 and 1970, of which half would be in Toa Payoh New Town, and to complete the urban renewal programme.

²²⁸ HB 178/59 Vol. II, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 7 Jun 1962.

²²⁹ HB 178/59 Vol. III, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 25 Nov 1965.

Regardless of the unpopularity of the emergency flats, the development of Bukit Ho Swee Estate was a watershed in the history of public housing in Singapore. In a memorandum from Teh Cheang Wan to Howe Yoon Chong on 4 December 1963, the Chief Architect, in underlining the need to continue to pursue a vigorous policy of land acquisition, noted,

At the beginning of our first 5-Year Programme, the Board had clear or relatively unencumbered sites in Queenstown, St. Michael's Road, MacPherson Road, Kallang, Tanjong Rhu, Selegie Road, and Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire Site. These sites have been gradually constructed in the course of the last few years and our building programme would have run into difficulties if not for the God-sent opportunity of the Bukit Ho Swee fire in 1961 where a site was made available for 10,000 units of flats.²³⁰

The Bukit Ho Swee flats gave the government a strategic foothold in both its kampong clearance and urban renewal schemes south of the Singapore River,²³¹ out of which, the HDB envisaged, 'a planned new city will be built'.²³² The urban renewal project, advised by a United Nations team of experts in 1963 and started in earnest by the Board the following year, was a massive modernist undertaking to clear shophouse dwellings in the Central Area. The key to the success of the programme was to first resettle families residing in the area in flats located on the urban periphery. As Alan Choe remarked, 'You don't run before you can crawl'.²³³ In 1964, having built more than 40,000 flats since its inception, the Board declared confidently that the back of Singapore's housing problem had been broken.²³⁴ In October, the Board opened the vacant flats on the top floors of blocks in Bukit Ho Swee for application to families evicted from nearby South Precinct 1, south of the Singapore River, as part of the urban renewal programme.²³⁵ When the HDB began

²³⁰ HB 1013/50 Vol. I, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to CEO, HDB, 4 Dec 1963.

²³¹ The fire also yielded, literally, the raw material for the Kallang Basin Reclamation Project, with a quarter of a million cubic yards of earth from the fire site used to reclaim 25 acres of land at Kallang. HDB, *Annual Report 1961*, p. 24.

²³² HB 141/52, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 11 Aug 1964.

²³³ OHC, interview with Alan Choe, 1 Jul 1997.

²³⁴ HDB, *Annual Report 1964*, p. 41.

²³⁵ HB 178/59 Vol. III, Minutes of Allocations Committee Meeting on 7 Oct 1964.

to clear *towgay* (beansprout)-growers along Palembang Road in North Precinct 1, the Board even wanted to convert shops in Bukit Ho Swee into agricultural lots for five agriculturists, who, not surprisingly, rejected the offer.²³⁶ By late 1964, there were also a total of 177 Malay families, rehoused mainly from the northeastern part of the Central Area, now living in flats in Bukit Ho Swee.²³⁷

The clearance of Covent Garden, which had hit a social and political snag in 1960, also revived in 1965 under the urban renewal programme. In early 1967, the kampong was clearly on the government's clearance agenda, being described by Chan Choy Siong and other government officials as an insanitary area where 'people, poultry and pigs share the same roof'.²³⁸ By January 1970, it was triumphantly announced that, with only 12 families remaining on the site out of an original number of over 600, 'Covent Garden is finished as a notorious slum area'.²³⁹ Still, a fire swept through the remaining wooden houses the following month and rendered 200 people homeless.²⁴⁰ Joyce Soh's family was evicted from 52 Covent Garden and moved to Bukit Merah Estate to the south.²⁴¹ The other residents were relocated to HDB flats in Bukit Merah, Alexandra, Queenstown, and Bukit Ho Swee.²⁴² Around 1968, my mother and her family, comprising her mother and four brothers, had been similarly evicted and rehoused in a 2-room HDB flat in Bukit Merah.²⁴³

As modern flats enabled the PAP government to resettle families en masse, organised resistance to rehousing soon became untenable. After the Barisan Sosialis was formed in September 1961, the Singapore Country People's Association and the Singapore Rural Residents' Association supported the new party. Chan Chiaw Thor (the former Singapore Farmers' Association leader), Poh Soon Seng (President of the SCPA), Sim Boh Kuan (President of the SRRA), and Chio Cheng Thun (Secretary of the SRRA) all condemned the government for its right-wing

²³⁶ HB 126/57, Resume of the Clearance Position Regarding Towgay Growers in North Precinct, 24 Nov 1964.

²³⁷ HB 178/59 Vol. III, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Allocations Committee, 30 Oct 1964.

²³⁸ *ST*, 28 Feb 1967.

²³⁹ *ST*, 22 Jan 1970.

²⁴⁰ *ST*, 27 Mar 1970.

²⁴¹ Author's interview with Joyce Soh, 5 Apr 2007.

²⁴² Author's interview with Teo Khoon Wah, 23 Mar 2007.

²⁴³ Author's interview with Loh Siew Har, 2 Feb 2006.

reactionary politics.²⁴⁴ American observers feared that the rural associations, along with the labour and student unions, would give the Barisan sufficient mass support to topple the Lee Kuan Yew government in an election.²⁴⁵ In 1961-1962, the rural associations organised resistance against the PAP's merger campaign and the HDB's resettlement of wooden house dwellers in Toa Payoh.²⁴⁶ The associations had an estimated combined membership of 12,000-15,000 in late 1961. The SCPA, which claimed to represent 25,000 villagers in Toa Payoh alone,²⁴⁷ objected that the clearance would inflict economic hardship on the villagers and demanded higher rates of compensation.²⁴⁸ By April 1962, the organised resistance had slowed the first phase of the Toa Payoh clearance.²⁴⁹ In Changi and at East Coast Road, the SCPA demanded that the HDB reduce flat rentals for evicted wooden house dwellers to 30-40% of the original rates.²⁵⁰ In Potong Pasir, the SRRA represented 174 landowners protesting the Board's decision to increase land rents in late 1961.²⁵¹ The SCPA also organised stiff resistance in 1962-1963 against the Kallang Basin Reclamation Project, demanding appropriate compensation for the evicted dwellers and guarantees for their livelihood after resettlement.²⁵²

A coalescing international entente of conservative forces, however, overtook the urban and rural resistance to rehousing. The PAP was determined to smash its leftwing opposition and repeatedly warned the Malayan and British colonial governments of a deepening communist threat to their respective security interests in the region. In February 1963, a massive purge orchestrated by the PAP, Malayan

²⁴⁴ RG 59, 746F.00/9-1561, Despatch from US Consul General to Department of State titled 'Left-Wingers in Rural Areas Desert the PAP', 15 Sep 1961; author's interviews with Chan Chiaw Thor, 15 Sep 2006; Poh Soon Seng, 19 Sep 2006; and Chio Cheng Thun, 7 Mar 2007.

²⁴⁵ RG 59, 746F.00/9-1561, Despatch from US Consul General to Department of State titled 'Left-Wingers in Rural Areas Desert the PAP', 15 Sep 1961.

²⁴⁶ RG 59, 746F.00/9-1561, Despatch from US Consul General to Department of State titled 'Left-Wingers in Rural Areas Desert the PAP', 15 Sep 1961; HB 1166/57, Memo from Resettlement Officer, HDB, to CEO, HDB, 16 Aug 1963; HDB, *Annual Report 1962*, p. 14; Lee Ting Hui, *The Open United Front: The Communist Struggle in Singapore, 1954-1966* (Singapore: South Seas Society, 1996), pp. 137, 266.

²⁴⁷ HB 722/3/55, Minutes of Meeting with SCPA Representatives, 26 Mar 1962.

²⁴⁸ HB 722/3/55, Memo from SCPA to Toa Payoh Clearance Liaison Committee, 8 Jul 1961; CO 1030/1597, Memo titled 'Public Housing in Singapore' by the UK Commission, 16 Apr 1963.

²⁴⁹ HB 722/3/55, Minutes of Board Meeting, 12 Apr 1962; John Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle for Success* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1984), pp. 256-57.

²⁵⁰ HB 993/50 Vol. III, Monthly Report by Lands Officer, November 1961.

²⁵¹ HB 364/58, Memo from Lands Officer, HDB, to Acting Lands Manager, HDB, 5 Dec 1961; and Letter from General Secretary, SRRA, to Minister for National Development, 23 Nov 1961.

²⁵² Gamer, *The Politics of Urban Development in Singapore*, pp. 66-70.

and British colonial governments called Operation Coldstore detained 113 leading leftists, including Lim Chin Siong, Fong Swee Suan and Chan Chiaw Thor, on charges of a conspiracy to create a 'Cuba in Singapore' through violent revolution.²⁵³ In June, Lee Kuan Yew warned of the dangers of Singapore falling to the communists if there was insufficient public housing for the people, for 'there will be more squalor, more slums, and where will democracy be?'²⁵⁴ Singapore joined Malaysia on 16 September, ending 144 years of British rule, but public housing remained, crucially, under the PAP's control.²⁵⁵

In the snap general elections held on 21 September, the PAP won 37 out of 51 seats, with the severely-weakened Barisan obtaining 13.²⁵⁶ Some of the wards were fiercely-contested, with resettlement and rehousing being key issues. In Paya Lebar constituency, 'a very dangerous district where the majority of the people were the labouring class and farmers' and 'where the Barisan had an advantage', Tan Kia Gan, the Minister for National Development, was defeated.²⁵⁷ In Delta, too, Chan Choy Siong held on to her seat by the barest of margins against strong support for the Barisan candidate, Wee Toon Lip. Although Wee, a trade unionist and the Secretary-General of the leftwing Singapore Association of Trade Unions,²⁵⁸ had not been involved in grassroots work in the constituency, he still polled 40% of the vote, losing to Chan by a mere 63 votes. The close shave shocked the PAP.

²⁵³ *ST*, 3 Feb 1963. The Barisan was accused of involvement in subversive activities leading to the anti-British revolt by the Brunei left in December 1962. The Internal Security Council in Singapore, which formally sanctioned the arrests, comprised 3 Singapore, 3 British and 1 Malayan members. Recent archival research shows that the British Commission in Singapore understood that Lee Kuan Yew simply wanted to use the arrests to eliminate his political opponents. The Commission believed that the Barisan operated within constitutional means and did not constitute a security threat. But the local British officials were eventually vetoed by their superiors in London who wanted to sanction the arrests to persuade the Malayan government, which feared the establishment of a communist Singapore, to accede to the British plan for a Malaysian state comprising Malaya, Singapore and the Borneo Territories. Simon J. Ball, 'Selkirk in Singapore', *Twentieth Century British History*, 10, 2 (1999); Matthew Jones, 'Creating Malaysia: Singapore's Security, the Borneo Territories, and the Contours of British Policy, 1961-1963', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 28 (2), 2000; and T. N. Harper, 'Lim Chin Siong and the "Singapore Story"', in Tan Jing Quee & Jomo K. S. (eds), *Comet in Our Sky: Lim Chin Siong in History* (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 2001).

²⁵⁴ *ST*, 1 Jun 1963.

²⁵⁵ The PAP also exercised control over education and labour. MC, *New Chapter in Singapore's History* (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1963), p. 5.

²⁵⁶ In its election campaign, the Barisan criticised the government for neglecting the interests of farmers and other underprivileged socio-economic groups. The PAP won 47% of the popular vote, while the Barisan polled a third. Chio Cheng Thun of the SRRA was successful in Chua Chu Kang but resigned from Parliament in 1966. Lee Kah Chuen, *The 1963 Singapore General Election*, unpublished academic exercise, Department of History, University of Singapore, 1977, p. 45.

²⁵⁷ OHC, interview with Ong Chye Hock, 12 Mar 1982.

²⁵⁸ Barisan Sosialis, *Plebian*, 16 Sep 1963, p. 2.

Nevertheless, the polls signalled the first electoral shift to the right in Bukit Ho Swee and in Singapore generally.²⁵⁹ After the elections, Wee was detained in a second crackdown on leftwing politicians and trade unionists. The SCPA and SRRA were also charged with ‘agitation on behalf of the Communists’ and operating ‘recruiting and training centres for Communist cadres in the rural areas’ and deregistered in November.²⁶⁰ The Barisan took over some of the associations’ local branches and attempted to retain its grassroots influence but its political reach had been drastically curtailed.²⁶¹ The government’s rehousing plans, ‘each rivaling the other in size and scope’, were consequently able to proceed.²⁶² Following the political purges, wooden house dwellers in Toa Payoh increasingly accepted the HDB’s compensation and rehousing terms.²⁶³ Over a hundred acres were cleared in Toa Payoh by the following year.²⁶⁴

In 1964, when worsening relations between the PAP and Malay-controlled Federal governments during the merger with Malaysia led to an increase in racial tensions, the HDB’s urban renewal programme encountered the resistance of Malay kampong dwellers. In April, an HDB demolition squad without a police escort was assaulted at MacPherson Road South by Malay kampong dwellers.²⁶⁵ In May and June, the Singapore branch of the United Malays National Organisation, the ruling party of Malaysia, formed a Malay Action Committee to organise Malay kampong dwellers in the Central Area and the Kallang Basin against resettlement, a measure which contributed to the outbreak of race riots in July and temporarily halted the resettlement of Malay families.²⁶⁶ But after Singapore was ejected from Malaysia and became a sovereign nation-state in August 1965, the influence of Malaysian politics disappeared. A total of 12,829 families in Singapore were evicted from their

²⁵⁹ Author’s interview with Wee Toon Lip, 14 May 2007.

²⁶⁰ *ST*, 4 Oct 1963.

²⁶¹ A1838/3024/2/2/11 Part I, Despatch from First Secretary, Australian High Commission, to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, 23 Nov 1963.

²⁶² A1838/751/2 Part II, Singapore Economic Summary by the American Consulate General, 4th Quarter, 1964.

²⁶³ CO 1030/1597, Memo titled ‘Public Housing in Singapore’ by the UK Commission, 16 Apr 1963.

²⁶⁴ HDB, *Annual Report 1964*, pp. 40-41.

²⁶⁵ HB 659/53, Memo from Assistant Lands Officer, HDB, to Acting Lands Manager, HDB, 20 May 1964.

²⁶⁶ A1838/751/2 Part II, Despatch titled ‘Singapore: The Economic Situation’ by the Australian High Commission, Oct 1964; Albert Lau, *A Moment of Anguish: Singapore in Malaysia and the Politics of Disengagement* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1998), pp. 138-46; Gamer, *The Politics of Urban Development in Singapore*, pp. 71-79.

homes between 1960 and 1965, of which three-quarters moved to planned resettlement areas or accepted HDB flats, with the remainder finding their own accommodation in the dwindling numbers of shophouse cubicles or wooden houses. A revised resettlement policy in 1964, providing higher compensation rates for kampong dwellers,²⁶⁷ and a new Land Acquisition Act in 1966, which authorised the compulsory acquisition of land required for public development at pre-development values, further accelerated the clearance campaign.²⁶⁸

In 1964, the HDB also launched a Home Ownership Scheme to encourage lower middle-income families to purchase flats in Queenstown at prices of \$4,900 and \$6,200 for 2- and 3-room flats respectively, payable through monthly installments.²⁶⁹ Four years later, a further step towards building a nation of homeowners was taken when applicants were allowed to use their compulsory savings in the Central Provident Fund to pay for the flats.²⁷⁰ This move, which enabled families to pay for their homes through monthly installments not much higher than the rentals, made the ownership scheme a resounding success. By tying down homeowners to a regular income obtained from full-time, salaried employment, the Home Ownership Scheme contributed significantly to integrating low-income Chinese families into the social fabric of the state. From the standpoint of social history, the scheme also signified and reinforced an important change in the 1960s, when housing became a central asset desired by the population. No longer simply considered important solely in terms of its proximity to one's workplace, family or relatives, or as a place to bring up one's children, housing now began to be valued for its material quality, and for the permanence and security of residence it afforded. Increasingly, Chinese families began to view tenancy in unauthorised wooden housing as markedly inferior to the rental, and subsequently the purchase, of public housing. This new social attitude, which is examined more closely in the following chapter, was certainly evident in Bukit Ho Swee. By the end of 1971, more than a quarter of the flats in the estate – 452 improved 1-room, 453 2-room and 2,405 3-

²⁶⁷ HDB, *Annual Report 1964*, p. 25.

²⁶⁸ *SPD*, 22 Jun 1966, pp. 133-34, 406-16.

²⁶⁹ HDB, *Annual Report 1964*, pp. 9-10; *ST*, 12 Feb 1964.

²⁷⁰ HDB, *Annual Report 1968*, p. 16.

room flats – had been sold, with a further 1,108 applicants waiting to purchase flats in the estate.²⁷¹

Following the Bukit Ho Swee inferno of 1961, the HDB maintained its robust response to smaller kampong fires throughout the 1960s. On 8 March 1963, a major fire ravaged four acres of a congested kampong off Havelock Road at Bukit Ban Kee, near Bukit Ho Swee. The blaze destroyed 350 wooden houses and rendered 358 families (2,000 persons) homeless.²⁷² The next morning, the HDB registered 230 families for rehousing, with 206 families eventually accepting temporary housing, mostly 1-room flats, in Bukit Ho Swee Estate under rent subsidy. When the subsidised period ended and many families in 2- and 3-room flats had difficulty paying the rents, the HDB allowed them to share 3-room flats or transfer to cheaper 1-room flats.²⁷³ The Bukit Ban Kee fire demonstrated the strategic importance of the Bukit Ho Swee flats in sheltering fire victims from nearby kampongs. The Bukit Ban Kee fire site was also acquired for public housing, in turn facilitating the clearance of other kampongs. By 1966, the first 534 1-room flats at Bukit Ban Kee had been completed, followed by larger 2- to 4-room flats.

The successful HDB rehousing was once again followed by expressions of considerable anger among the fire victims directed against the government over the cause of the Bukit Ban Kee disaster. Clearly, what was perceived to have happened at Bukit Ho Swee less than two years earlier had become part of Singapore's collective memory. Lim Kok Peng's grandfather had been the defacto headman of Bukit Ban Kee, who had built the first attap houses on the hill. According to Lim, the cause of the 1963 fire was attributed either to gangsters or an unemployed opium smoker hired to set the fire, while the opposition parties also blamed the blaze on the government. Lim observed that 'it was just like the Bukit Ho Swee fire. There were many rumours but there was no evidence'.²⁷⁴ In December that year, the Barisan Assemblyman for Thomson, Koo Young, publicly criticised the HDB's rehousing policy:

²⁷¹ HDB, *Annual Report 1971*, pp. 92-93.

²⁷² SFB, *Annual Report 1963*, p. 4.

²⁷³ *SLAD*, 7 Jun 1963, pp. 505-506.

²⁷⁴ OHC, interview with Lim Kok Peng, 16 May 2005. Lim later became a well-regarded Chinese writer.

Whenever a fire breaks out in any part of Singapore, the Minister will go there and grab the land for building houses, ignoring other considerations. How can the fire victims afford to move into Housing Board flats after having had their belongings burnt down?....They are only building houses on the sufferings of the people.²⁷⁵

On 4 November 1964, another inferno swept through 200 wooden houses built on stilts over three acres of swampy land at Pulau Minyak, north of Geylang Lorong 1.²⁷⁶ The fire destroyed 150 houses and rendered 325 families (1,657 people) homeless. Just a day after the fire, the HDB had allocated flats to 264 families (approximately 1,500 persons) at Tanjong Rhu, MacPherson and Queenstown estates.²⁷⁷ Ong Lian Teng, the Barisan's Assemblyman for Pasir Panjang, flatly attacked the government's pragmatic emergency relief programme,

Every year hundreds of attap houses go up in flames. These houses happened to be in areas under eviction orders. This is a coincidence. If this is arranged by God, we would rather say that it is arranged by the PAP.²⁷⁸

Chan Chee Seng, the PAP Assemblyman for Jalan Besar (to which Pulau Minyak belonged), replied that the fire victims themselves accepted that the blaze was due to the negligence of 'careless people'.²⁷⁹

By 1965, the PAP government was politically secure enough to bluntly declare that it would clear all urban kampongs which constituted a fire hazard.²⁸⁰ By then, the kampong fire-fighting squads which had been politically expedient in mobilising the wooden house population a decade earlier had become redundant. The squads gradually disappeared when their kampongs were either destroyed by fire, as in the case of Bukit Ho Swee in 1961, or cleared for development, such as

²⁷⁵ *SLAD*, 10 Dec 1963, p. 251.

²⁷⁶ *SFB, Annual Report 1964*, pp. 11-12.

²⁷⁷ *SWD, Annual Report 1964*, p. 35.

²⁷⁸ *SLAD*, 17 Nov 1964, p. 639.

²⁷⁹ *SLAD*, 17 Nov 1964, pp. 641-42.

²⁸⁰ *HDB, Annual Report 1965*, pp. 23-24.

Bukit Bintang and Kallang Basin in 1964 and Tiong Bahru in 1965. By 1971, only 13 squads remained of the original 38 formed in 1958 and were themselves being progressively phased out.²⁸¹

The final fire of historical note struck the small kampong remaining in the Bukit Ho Swee locality at Carey Road on 23 November 1968.²⁸² The flames destroyed ninety wooden houses, rendering 436 families (2,119 people) homeless. 240 families registered for HDB housing and were housed temporarily in Board flats in nearby estates within 48 hours of the fire, but 120-odd families who stayed with their relatives and friends initially did not register. In the 1968 general elections, Bukit Ho Swee was detached from Delta to become a separate constituency. Its Member of Parliament, Seah Mui Kok, was a veteran trade unionist who had been chosen to match the working class profile of the estate's population.²⁸³ Seah took the opportunity provided by the fire later that year to exhort kampong dwellers to apply for HDB flats, saying, 'This fire should be a lesson to them. The government's offer of flats to them is still open and they should seize this opportunity before a fire breaks out in their squatter colony and causes them more hardship'.²⁸⁴ Seah also viewed the fire as a blessing in disguise which allowed a new housing estate to be built on the fire site.²⁸⁵ A *Straits Times* editorial agreed that 'squatter colonies are fire traps and are a threat both to those living in them and to the surrounding areas' and urged that if the wooden house dwellers were reluctant to move into HDB housing, 'appropriate incentives and pressures are essential to clear those areas in which fire hazards are specially concentrated'.²⁸⁶ At the end of 1968, 318 out of the 367 registered fire victim families had been rehoused in HDB flats. The 4-acre fire site was acquired for housing, pending clearance in 1972.²⁸⁷ Because of the sheer pace of rehousing and rebuilding which followed them, a PAP critic called blazes like the 1968 Bukit Ho Swee conflagration 'fires of convenience'.²⁸⁸

²⁸¹ In 1973, fire-fighting squads were organised in kampongs located on Singapore's southern islands.

²⁸² SFB, *Annual Report 1968*, p. 9.

²⁸³ Seah Mui Kok enjoyed a walkover in the 1968 elections. Chan Choy Siong remained the Member of Parliament for Delta, where she was also uncontested. She retired from politics in 1970 and was killed in a car accident in 1981.

²⁸⁴ *ST*, 25 Nov 1968.

²⁸⁵ OHC, interview with Seah Mui Kok, 17 Jun 1994.

²⁸⁶ *ST*, 26 Nov 1968.

²⁸⁷ HB 1013/50 Vol. II, Report titled 'Clearance Position of Major Clearance Sites', 31 Oct 1971.

²⁸⁸ T. J. S. George, *Lee Kuan Yew's Singapore* (London: Deutsch, 1973), p. 102.

Bukit Ho Swee Estate was a massive political victory for the PAP government, heralding the close association between public housing and political hegemony in the history of postcolonial Singapore. As Alan Choe said, Bukit Ho Swee 'was one of the things that made the population understand that this government can deliver the goods'.²⁸⁹ Conversely, the scale of the achievement gave the newly-established HDB a requisite psychological boost in its public housing project. The speed with which the Bukit Ho Swee flats were built became a defining benchmark by which the Board measured its efficacy. In 1962, when the HDB completed four building contracts and 2,828 flats in Bukit Ho Swee alone, it boasted of its ability to build a flat every 45 minutes,²⁹⁰ an achievement which greatly impressed Australian observers.²⁹¹ The flats of Bukit Ho Swee themselves, the authorities proudly stated, were being constructed at a rate of 3.5 units a day.²⁹² Success was also measured in terms of the ease of obtaining the public housing. The HDB declared that, while the waiting time for an SIT flat had been 2-3 years, for Board housing, it was one week if one was not too particular, or three weeks otherwise.²⁹³ The HDB viewed its flats with great pride. Teh Cheang Wan, in writing to the Commissioner of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 1964, boasted that the Board's multi-storey housing was fire-proof, such that '[e]ven in the big fire in 1961 in Bukit Ho Swee, the fire stopped at our flats at Delta Estate and none of the buildings were burnt'. Teh omitted to say that the flats had actually been built by the SIT and that the roofs of two blocks were partially scorched by the flames.²⁹⁴

Top HDB officials subsequently entered politics, reinforcing the important link between public housing and the making of the modern Singapore state. In 1962, the government awarded Lim Kim San the Order of Temasek for his housing accomplishments. Lim left the Board to contest Cairnhill constituency in the 1963

²⁸⁹ OHC, interview with Alan Choe, 1 Jul 1997.

²⁹⁰ HDB, *Annual Report 1962*, p. 4; MC, *Social Transformation in Singapore* (Singapore: Ministry of Culture, 1964), p. 60.

²⁹¹ A1838/751/2 Part II, Despatch titled 'Singapore: Economic and Financial Situation' by the Australian High Commission, Oct-Nov 1962.

²⁹² SBC, audio-visual programme titled *Diary of a Nation: Bukit Ho Swee Fire, 25 May 1961*, broadcast on 25 May 1988.

²⁹³ RCS, audio programme titled *This, Our Singapore (No. 5): Housing*, broadcast on 7 Jan 1963.

²⁹⁴ HB 141/52, Letter from Chief Architect, HDB, to Commissioner of the Federal Capital, Kuala Lumpur, 31 Jul 1964.

general elections, winning two-thirds of the vote. He was immediately appointed the Minister for National Development, with his former boss Tan Kia Gan switching places with him as the HDB's Chairman. In 1965, Lim was given the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 'marshalling talents and resources to provide one-fifth of the Singapore population with decent, moderately priced housing amidst attractive surroundings'.²⁹⁵ Lim became a trusted member of Lee Kuan Yew's inner circle, with, according to Lee, 'an intuitive sense for judging people, their character, their motivation and their capabilities', which Lee used 'to good purpose when I wanted candidates to be interviewed for jobs, especially for prospective MPs, to gauge their potential'.²⁹⁶ In 1979, six senior ministers and Members of Parliament resigned as part of the PAP's political renewal. Howe Yoon Chong, following a long civil service career, successfully contested Potong Pasir constituency and became the Minister of Defence.²⁹⁷ Teh Cheang Wan, uncontested in Geylang West in the same elections, was appointed the Minister for National Development.²⁹⁸

Throughout the 1960s, modern HDB estates steadily replaced the kampongs in Singapore City.²⁹⁹ By 1965, the Board had built 54,430 units of housing, well above the State Development Plan's target of 51,031 units and exceeding the annual construction targets every year except in 1965.³⁰⁰ In contrast, only about 500 temporary wooden dwellings were then being built yearly.³⁰¹ Foreign observers marveled that the HDB and private enterprise combined had succeeded in building 9.4 permanent dwellings per 1,000 inhabitants in 1960-1965, the highest rate in Asia and comparable to the construction rates in Western countries.³⁰² The Australian

²⁹⁵ HDB, *Annual Report 1965*, p. 16; Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, Citation for Lim Kim San, Ramon Magsaysay Award Presentation Ceremony in Manila, Philippines, 31 Aug 1965, <http://www.rmaf.org.ph/Awardees/Citation/CitationLimKimSan.htm>, accessed 15 Feb 2008.

²⁹⁶ *ST*, 22 Jul 2006.

²⁹⁷ Howe, who also held the portfolio of Minister for Health, retired in 1984.

²⁹⁸ Teh Cheang Wan was suspected of corruption in 1986 and subsequently committed suicide. A commission of inquiry appointed by the PAP government found Teh guilty of two cases of corruption but declared that no one else was involved. See Singapore, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Investigations Concerning the Late Mr Teh Cheang Wan* (Printed by Singapore National Printers, 1987), p. 55.

²⁹⁹ By 1970, only a third of households lived in attap- and zinc-roofed dwellings, compared to 31% living in HDB flats. In 1980, the figures were 12% and 61% respectively.

³⁰⁰ HDB, *Annual Report 1965*, p. 10.

³⁰¹ Singapore, *Master Plan First Review, 1965: Report of Survey* (Singapore: Planning Department, Ministry of National Development, 1965), pp. 33-34.

³⁰² A1838/751/2 Part III, *Financial Times*, 23 Dec 1966.

Commissioner surmised that the HDB had ‘changed the face of Singapore from a city with half a million people living in slums to a city noted for its tall housing unit complexes’.³⁰³ The HDB programme helped sustain Singapore’s economic development in the period 1959-1963.³⁰⁴ By 1965, housing construction remained economically important. The government’s building programme that year provided direct employment for an estimated 180,000 workers, and indirect work for an equal number.³⁰⁵ In the new urban periphery within a five-mile radius of the Central Area stood more than 50,000 units of public housing flats, accommodating 430,000 people or 23% of the population, in estates such as Tiong Bahru, Queenstown, Toa Payoh, St. Michael’s, MacPherson Road South, Kallang Airport, Tanjong Rhu, and first and foremost, Bukit Ho Swee. The HDB’s next planning step was to build self-contained satellite towns in the outlying areas, towards accomplishing the urgent call by the 1947 Housing Committee to disperse the population from the Central Area.³⁰⁶

In celebrating the achievements of the HDB’s first 5-year plan, Lee Kuan Yew proudly stated:

All great civilisations have this hallmark in common – imposing public buildings and good private dwellings....Singapore is a proud city. It is acquiring the one hallmark of a great civilised community, magnificent buildings plus comparable workers housing.³⁰⁷

The urban social and political margin which the British colonial regime had sought to erase had been removed by the People’s Action Party government. The emergence of Bukit Ho Swee Estate represented a vital catalyst for the government to eradicate the remaining urban kampongs of ‘Old Singapore’. About two-thirds of the estate’s population of 45,000 people in 1970 were not victims of the 1961 fire but rather, families affected by other kampong fires or by the urban renewal

³⁰³ A1838/751/2 Part III, Despatch titled ‘Singapore Economic Review, 1 Apr-9 Aug 1965’ by the Australian High Commission, 13 Oct 1965.

³⁰⁴ Goh Keng Swee in 1970, *The Economics of Modernisation and other Essays* (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press, 1972), p. 225.

³⁰⁵ A1838/751/2 Part II, Despatch titled ‘Singapore: Review of Economic Developments for the Final Quarter, 1964’ by the Australian High Commission, 26 Mar 1965.

³⁰⁶ Singapore, *Master Plan First Review*, pp. 92-96.

³⁰⁷ HDB, *50,000 Up: Homes for the People* (Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1966), p. 1.

programme. The intra-urban migration of families into Bukit Ho Swee was now closely-managed by the government and was radically different in form and intent from the previous uncontrolled movement into the kampong. In the new modern nation-state which was being forged, the former dwellers of semi-autonomous areas were being socially moulded into disciplined citizens living in systematically-organised housing estates. The changes in housing arrangements constituted, Lim Kim San proclaimed in 1964, 'a minor revolution in the social and living habits of a sizeable portion of the population'.³⁰⁸ HDB residents, as model citizens, were reminded, among other things, not to keep livestock in the house, obstruct the common corridors and stairways, illegally sublet the flat, or make unauthorised alterations to the flat, things they had been accustomed to doing in the kampong.³⁰⁹ In addition to the rules imposed from above, former kampong dwellers themselves increasingly came to value the rental and subsequently the ownership of public housing. The emergency housing project, underpinned by a controlling official discourse which stressed the urgency of providing shelter for a low-income population, mobilised and relocated nuclear families en masse and integrated them into the social fabric of the new state.³¹⁰ The result was a marked reduction in the autonomy of former urban kampong dwellers who hitherto had the freedom to move houses and sublet, rent, build, and rebuild their housing on their own terms. Tay Kheng Soon, one of Singapore's leading architects, argues that Teh Cheang Wan 'totally disempowered the Singapore population' by rehousing them in planned public housing estates,³¹¹ where 'there is no spontaneity at all in any social life because everything is mobilised from certain power centres which are in themselves dominated by the PAP system'.³¹²

In 1972, a state-controlled radio programme triumphantly declared that Bukit Ho Swee, like the proverbial phoenix, had 'risen from the ashes' as a self-contained

³⁰⁸ PAP, *Our First Ten Years: PAP 10th Anniversary Souvenir* (Singapore: PAP Central Editorial Board, 1964), p. 228.

³⁰⁹ HDB, *Residents' Guide Handbook* (Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1973), p. 5.

³¹⁰ Gregory K. Clancey, 'Towards A Spatial History of Emergency: Notes from Singapore', in R. Bishop, J. Phillips & W. W. Yeo (eds), *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 53.

³¹¹ School of Architecture, National University of Singapore, interview with Tay Kheng Soon for the Master's of Architecture Elective titled 'The Higher Ground: Architects and their Role in Society', 2000. <http://www.akitektenggara.com/articles/2000/interview.htm>, accessed 15 Feb 2008.

³¹² Author's interview with Tay Kheng Soon, 6 Oct 2006.

modern housing estate with schools, clinics, shops, markets, and playing fields. The programme hailed the social transformation as ‘a change that matters, not a change in statistics or concrete but in the quality of life of our people’. With the new homes built by the Housing and Development Board, the radio programme declared, ‘Singapore looks different, Singapore feels different, Singapore is different’. The public housing, the programme concluded, satisfied ‘the needs of a modern metropolis and a new nation’.³¹³ This was a powerful image and metaphor of Bukit Ho Swee Estate as an icon of progress in the making of modern Singapore. In the next chapter, we shall compare the surface representation with the underlying reality.

³¹³ RCS, audio programme titled *Then and Now (No. 1): ‘A Look At Housing*, broadcast on 16 Sep 1972.

Chapter 9

Change and Continuity: 1962-2008

Bukit Ho Swee Estate, in terms of its high modernist architecture and officially-sanctioned ways of life, was radically different from the kampong and the communal, semi-autonomous way of life it had replaced. Yet, from the very beginning, the estate maintained a tenacious social and cultural hold on its past. As Gerard Ee, a social worker in the estate since 1982, observed, 'You can take the guy out of the kampong but you cannot take the kampong out of the guy'.¹ This statement provides the starting point for examining the extent of change and continuity in everyday life in Bukit Ho Swee from the kampong era to the present. This approach also enables us to assess the impact of the 1961 inferno and the subsequent rebuilding programme on the community. This chapter initially considers the policies of the People's Action Party government aimed at maintaining and subsequently updating the state of modernity in the estate, including efforts to demolish and upgrade flats and to forge the desired social community. The chapter not only traces the ongoing lives of the former fire victims but also those of newcomers to Bukit Ho Swee, namely, the former kampong and shophouse dwellers affected by the Housing and Development Board's rehousing programme in the 1960s, as well as the generations of children and youths who grew up in the estate in the aftermath of the fire. The social history demonstrates that, despite the government's determined efforts, the semi-autonomous ways of life which had existed in Kampong Bukit Ho Swee have persisted in the estate to the present, highlighting the tensions inherent in the residents' social and economic relationship with the high modernist state. Social life in Bukit Ho Swee to a certain extent exemplified the larger changes occurring in Singapore but was in other ways remarkably different, with the estate still in the official mind perceived as much a 'black area' in the present as the kampong had been in the past. This chapter argues that the PAP government's central aim of establishing a socially disciplined 'nation'

¹ Author's interview with Gerard Ee, 13 Nov 2006. Ee is presently Executive Director of Beyond Social Services.

was deeply contested by the long-term social and cultural dynamics and contradictions of everyday life in Bukit Ho Swee.²

The Flats: Revitalisation and Modernity

In 1970, Bukit Ho Swee, measuring only 135 acres in size, was the third most densely populated estate in Singapore. With a population of 45,066 people, it had a density of 334 persons per acre, compared to the earlier kampong's density of 141 persons in 1957.³ The estate's population was a youthful one, a quarter of whom were under 10 years old and with just 6% aged 60 and above.⁴ Subsequently, however, Bukit Ho Swee's population matured much faster than in the rest of the nation. By 1980, there were only 20,773 persons in the estate, of whom only 12% were 10 and younger, well under the national average of 17%.⁵ This was partly due to the government's successful attempt to reduce the birth rate through family planning in the mid-1960s,⁶ but also part of a deeper shift in Chinese attitudes towards family. Throughout Singapore, young married couples were leaving the families, homes and estates in which they had grown up for larger, newer flats in outlying HDB townships in the north, east and west of the island.⁷ As early as 1977, the Singapore Parliament had heard from a Member that 'the aged and weak parents have been forsaken by the children'.⁸ By 1990, the proportion of children aged 10

² Lily Kong & Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of 'Nation'* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), pp. 2, 11.

³ P. Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970, Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1973), pp. 238-39.

⁴ P. Arumainathan, *Census of Population, 1970: Interim Release* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1970), pp. 4, 5.

⁵ Khoo Chian Kim, *Census of Population 1980, Singapore: Administrative Report* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 1983), p. 210; and *Census of Population 1980, Singapore: Release No. 5 Geographical Distribution* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 1983), p. 66. In 1984, Bukit Ho Swee was merged into Kim Seng constituency. In the 1990 census, the estate was surveyed as part of the Kim Seng census division, which comprised Delta-Havelock Estate, and returned a population figure of 23,683. The 1990 census figures given here are consequently of the Kim Seng census division. Lau Kak En, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Transport & Geographic Distribution* (Singapore: SNP Publishers for Census of Population Office, Department of Statistics, 1992), p. 79.

⁶ In 1966, the government had established a Family Planning and Population Board as part of its 5-Year National Planning Programme to reduce Singapore's population growth. At the end of the plan, the national birth rate had declined from 28.6 in 1966 to 22.1 in 1970. Family Planning & Population Board, *Annual Report 1970*, p. 1.

⁷ Lau Kak En, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Households & Housing* (Singapore: SNP Publishers for Census of Population Office, Department of Statistics, 1992), p. 3.

⁸ *SPD*, 16 Feb 1977, p. 220.

and younger in Bukit Ho Swee had dropped further to 9%, while only 13% of single nuclear family households were comprised of three generations. The population of the Central Development Guide Plan Region, which encompassed demographically mature estates like Bukit Ho Swee, fell by nearly a fifth, while there were nearly twice as many elderly persons aged 60 and above still residing in the Central region as in other regions.⁹ Already occurring in the postwar years, this pattern of the physical mobility of younger families *without* their parents was characteristic of postcolonial Singapore; in 2000, more than half of all households in the state had changed residence within the preceding decade. By then, a fifth of Bukit Ho Swee's population of 19,737 persons were aged 60 and above.¹⁰

Png Pong Tee epitomises the family experience common among the elderly residents of Bukit Ho Swee. After the 1961 fire, she moved with her four children from a wooden house in Kampong Bahru into a 1-room emergency flat at Taman Ho Swee. Widowed, she struggled to support the family by herself, earning \$2.80 an hour on weekdays and \$1.80 on Saturdays as a *long sai*, and borrowing from *ah long* (unlicensed moneylenders) when the wages were inadequate to maintain the family. When her children were older, they persuaded Png to move into a 2-room flat in Queenstown. At the present, the four children had long moved out upon marriage, leaving her all alone in the flat and visiting only sporadically.

Png's lament that 'if one is *pai mia* ('has a hard life'), it will always be like that the whole life' is not unique among the experiences of the first generation who had lived in public housing.¹¹ Their children's migration to newer flats illustrated tensions within the Chinese family. As Tan Tiam Ho, who with his family lived in Block 6, recalled, 'My son used to stay with me but has moved out to a condominium in the West. I cursed him to no end. I didn't allow him to move. I asked him, "Why did you have to stay in such a big house?"'¹² Similarly, Jimmy Yi, who moved into a 3-room flat in Block 16 with his family in 1963, now lives alone.

⁹ Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Transport & Geographic Distribution*, pp. 12-13, 22.

¹⁰ Leow Bee Geok, *Census of Population 2000: Households & Housing* (Singapore: Department of Statistics, 2001), pp. 12, 38.

¹¹ Author's interview with Png Pong Tee, 10 Jan 2008.

¹² Author's interview with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007.



Plate 9.1: Png Pong Tee with author at her home, 2008 (Photograph by author).

His brothers had left when they married, because, as he said, ‘they don’t want to stay here! They moved out and earned their own living, they don’t care about our father and mother’.¹³ Tay Ming Choo (born 1935), who moved into a 3-room flat in Block 22 in 1970 with seven other family members, also lives alone:

Everyone who wanted to buy a flat would ask me, ‘Auntie, do you want to sell your flat?’ I said, ‘If I sell, where would I move to?’ My son is staying in Sengkang in a large 5-room flat. He asked me to sell this flat and move in with him but I said no. This flat was bought by his father and I am happy to stay here, so I don’t have to move out to stay with my son. [Laughs]¹⁴

The high-rise housing required a period of adaptation for family members who had previously lived on the ground in a kampong house. Residents responding to closed questions on national radio in the early 1960s unfailingly stated their satisfaction with the living conditions, cleanliness,¹⁵ and even the beauty of the

¹³ Author’s interview with Jimmy Yi, 4 Feb 2007.

¹⁴ Author’s interview with Tay Ming Choo, 29 Oct 2007.

¹⁵ RCS, audio programme titled *This, Our Singapore (No. 5): Housing*, broadcast on 7 Jan 1963.

modern housing.¹⁶ A resident in a 3-room flat simply replied ‘Yes’ to ‘questions’ such as ‘With the lift, it [living on the 6th floor] should be convenient’, and ‘If [the school is] nearer, you won’t have to take a bus, you can just walk. It’s also safer’.¹⁷ In reality, high-rise living drastically overturned former kampong dwellers’ conceptions of space and place. As a resident explained, ‘the kampong was big and spacious, with a lot of space to look out to, but here in an HDB flat, one person has only so much space’.¹⁸ Vertical living also created social problems and tensions which did not exist to the same extent in the kampong. The greatest proportion of respondents (37%) to an HDB sample household survey in 1969, mostly living on the first three floors of the housing block, cited ‘rubbish thrown from upstairs’ as the main cause of dissatisfaction with the floor location of their flat.¹⁹ Wet laundry hung on bamboo poles outside the windows were a constant source of irritation both for the owners of laundry hung out on lower floors and for passersby below.²⁰ This simple method of drying laundry consequently annoyed HDB estate management officials but was a Chinese custom long practiced in shophouse dwellings in the Central Area; the colourful wash also, British observers noted, helped to ‘soften the harsh exterior of the severely modern architecture’.²¹

For elderly residents, high-rise flats were initially foreign and even dangerous places. They literally became ‘traps’ for elderly persons confined to living on the higher floors, who, fearing that the lifts would break down, dared not

¹⁶ NAS, audio-visual recording titled *A Pictorial Exhibition: The Emergence Of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation To Progress*, broadcast in Nov 1983. A survey was conducted in the mid-1960s on the prevalence of two common illnesses among the children of 159 families living in Bukit Ho Swee Estate (half of whom were former fire victims) and of 169 families still residing in unauthorised wooden housing at Carey Road. The main study was of soil-transmitted parasites called helminths which commonly spread via contact with contaminated bucket toilets or through the consumption of uncooked food. The study found that wooden house dwellers had a significantly higher rate of infection than flat dwellers who might have formerly lived in wooden dwellings, and concluded that modern housing with proper sanitary amenities had a ‘pronounced’ effect in reducing the incidence of helminths. However, the study also found the incidence of enteroviruses, which spread through direct physical contact, to be lower among wooden house dwellers than flat dwellers. This led the author to suggest that, contrary to the above argument, the overcrowded living conditions in the emergency flats, the residents’ inadequate use of water (which was payable by meter) and their poor hygiene habits were to blame. J. W. L. Kleevens, *Housing and Health in a Tropical City: A Selective Study in Singapore, 1964-1967* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Company, 1972), pp. 98-104, 112-13.

¹⁷ RCS, audio programme titled *This, Our Singapore* (No. 5): *Housing*, broadcast on 8 Jan 1963.

¹⁸ Author’s interview with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006.

¹⁹ Stephen H. K. Yeh, *Housing and Development Board Sample Household Survey*, Vol. II (Singapore: Economic Research Centre, University of Singapore: Housing and Development Board of Singapore, 1969), p. 33.

²⁰ *ST*, 2 Mar 1973.

²¹ CO 1030/1597, Memo titled ‘Public Housing in Singapore’ by the UK Commission, 16 Apr 1963.

use them.²² The HDB's 1969 household survey revealed that 57% of the respondents found the lifts unsatisfactory.²³ Of his grandfather, who had lived in a spacious wooden house but was relocated to a flat at Ganges Avenue after the fire, Ong Eng Boon said, 'In the flat, he couldn't get used to it. He didn't have any feeling with the flat. There was nowhere to move, not like in the olden days'.²⁴ The flats came to be known as places of *tiao lau* ('jumping off a building'), due to the incidence of elderly persons committing suicide this way.²⁵ When Tan Peng Kiat first moved from a shophouse in the Central Area into a flat on the thirteenth floor of Block 22 in 1966, although she was only 37 then, she felt that it was 'very high. I was very afraid. But if I didn't look out, it would be alright'.²⁶ The flats were also social traps for young children who had to remain home locked up while their parents were out working. Social workers knocking on the doors of 1-room flats in the estate during working hours frequently found that children 'would open the door to strangers, and you see all young ones, the young ones taking care of the not so young ones'.²⁷ For instance, living in a 1-room emergency flat in Block 5, Angie Ng's mother arranged for her and her sister to attend alternate morning and afternoon school sessions so that one of them would be home to do household chores and take care of the three younger children.²⁸ Similarly, as Tan Beng Huat (born 1958), who lived in a 2-room rental unit in Block 42 with his parents and nine siblings, recalled, 'Only myself and my elder sister studied. If she studied in the afternoon, I would study in the morning, then one of us will do the cooking. She would do the lunch, I would do the dinner. Imagine just a Primary 3 or 4 boy, I had to cook dinner'.²⁹

From having been a landmark public housing estate, Bukit Ho Swee was soon materially and architecturally overtaken by newer, larger HDB estates built further away from the Central Area. Where half of the 12,000-odd flats in Bukit Ho Swee were 1-room flats in 1965, only a quarter were 1- and 2-room units at the

²² *ST*, 9 Aug 1989.

²³ Yeh, *Housing and Development Board Sample Household Survey*, Vol. IV, p. 34.

²⁴ Author's interview with Ong Eng Boon, 4 Apr 2007.

²⁵ Author's interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

²⁶ Author's interview with Tan Peng Kiat, 26 Jul 2007.

²⁷ Author's interview with Leela Kwek, 2 May 2007.

²⁸ Author's interview with Angie Ng, 8 Feb 2007.

²⁹ Author's interview with Tan Beng Huat, 30 Apr 2007.

century's end, with more than half being 3-room units. Across Singapore, however, only 8% of all flats by 1990 were 1- and 2-room units, while 4-room flats comprised 40% of the national total but only 2% in Bukit Ho Swee.³⁰ A decade later, 68% of all households in Singapore were living in 4-room or larger flats but in Bukit Ho Swee, the figure was only a fifth.³¹ Similarly, the percentage of the estate's flats in ownership increased from 55% in 1980 to 76% in 1990 while still trailing the national averages for Chinese families, which rose from 62% in 1980 to 88% in 1990.³² In 1983, 4,293 flats in Bukit Ho Swee, mostly 1- and 2-room units, were still being rented, compared to 3,456 flats, mostly 3-room units, which had been purchased.³³ Home ownership was desired by many residents in the estate as generally was the case in Singapore but this depended crucially on having a regular income. Working as a foreman in Robinsons Company, Lee Ah Gar was able to use his state-enforced savings in the Central Provident Fund to purchase a 3-room flat in Indus Road in 1972, since 'the rent for the 3-room flat would be the same as the monthly rental payment, and then my children can live in better housing'.³⁴ Bukit Ho Swee consequently gradually acquired a dual character, with a home-owning population residing in 3-room flats and a low-income 'underclass' renting the smaller flats.

The philosophy of high modernism demanded that the public housing be constantly renewed through a controlled process of demolition and rebuilding. In 1979, the HDB scheduled 53 blocks of 10,976 1-room emergency flats in Bukit Ho Swee and elsewhere in Singapore for demolition to make way for new flats or social amenities, with their tenants offered larger Board housing nearby; 29 other blocks of emergency flats would also be upgraded into larger self-contained units.³⁵ The demolition project was justified through an official discourse of social rejuvenation, as part of an HDB plan to 'restructure' older housing estates and combine them into new towns, where social amenities could be built on the former emergency housing

³⁰ Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Households & Housing*, pp. 16, 35.

³¹ Leow, *Census of Population 2000*, pp. 11, 40.

³² Khoo, *Census of Population 1980, Singapore: Release No. 5 Geographical Distribution*, p. 173; Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Households & Housing*, p. 18; Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Transport & Geographic Distribution*, p. 154.

³³ HDB, *Annual Report 1982/1983*, pp. 62, 66.

³⁴ Author's interview with Lee Ah Gar, 4 Nov 2006.

³⁵ HDB, *Annual Report 1978/1979*, p. 7.

sites. Under the scheme of revitalisation, Bukit Ho Swee and Tiong Bahru estates, with a combined total of 26,000 units of housing, were integrated into a single new town.³⁶ The philosophy of high modernism did not allow for the negative experiences of living in emergency housing to be publicly articulated until such a time when the emergency housing was ready to be demolished and replaced by ‘superior’ housing. This was, however, precisely the moment in time when some form of community among the residents had emerged. In 1981, Teh Cheang Wan, the Minister for National Development and the architect behind the emergency housing, explained that the demolition project was both necessary and desirable, since ‘they have served their useful purpose and their standard is considered too low today’.³⁷ The initial response in Bukit Ho Swee to the demolition scheme was mixed. The Member of Parliament for Kim Seng constituency, which included Bukit Ho Swee, found that while some residents were happy to move into larger HDB housing, others were financially unable to do so.³⁸ The government, however, was determined to ‘apply a little bit of pressure or...ask a local Member of Parliament to use a little bit of persuasion’ to relocate the residents.³⁹ In the official view, erasing a ‘failed experiment’ from the context of the estate was a fully justified damage limitation exercise.⁴⁰ In 1980, the first 22 blocks of emergency flats in Singapore were demolished, including units in Jalan Bukit Ho Swee, Tiong Bahru Road and Havelock Road. Within five years, the last emergency flats in Bukit Ho Swee associated with the rehousing of the 1961 fire victims had disappeared. At present, there remain only two blocks of self-contained 1-room flats in the estate: Block 33 in Taman Ho Swee, already scheduled for en bloc redevelopment (see below), and Block 79 at Indus Road.

Another key component of the policy and post 1980s discourse of social revitalisation was the upgrading programme for larger flats. In 1990, the HDB declared that it would upgrade older housing estates in order to ‘create the physical conditions that will bring about a greater sense of community’.⁴¹ In May 1992, a pioneer batch of six precincts including Bukit Ho Swee was announced for the Main

³⁶ HDB, *Annual Report 1979/1980*, p. 6.

³⁷ *SPD*, 20 Mar 1981, p. 998.

³⁸ *SPD*, 22 Mar 1979, p. 1048.

³⁹ *SPD*, 22 Mar 1979, p. 1062.

⁴⁰ Author’s interview with Liu Thai Ker, 14 Dec 2006.

⁴¹ HDB, *Annual Report 1989/1990*, p. 37.

Upgrading Programme (MUP).⁴² The MUP extended the long established association between public housing and bolstering the PAP's political legitimacy; the six precincts were part of three constituencies where the party had won landside victories in the 1991 elections.⁴³ The upgrading programme, subsidised by the government up to 75-92% of the cost and requiring the consent of 75% of the residents, also became a major means of social mobilisation. The official grassroots organisations operating in HDB estates – the community centres' management committees and the constituency's Citizens' Consultative Committee – worked actively to canvas popular support for the MUP through brochures, dialogue sessions, preliminary surveys, and promotional exhibitions.⁴⁴ An average of 91.4% of the residents in the six precincts voted for the Standard Package of the programme (which included improvements to both the flat and building façade), with a sizeable minority opting for the more expensive Standard Plus Package (which provided for new flat space and the addition of another toilet).⁴⁵

Nine blocks of housing in Taman Ho Swee, containing the 276 2-room and 488 3-room units built in 1962, were selected to be the first flats in Singapore for upgrading.⁴⁶ Yeo Ning Hong, the Member of Parliament for the Kampong Glam Group Representation Constituency, which included Bukit Ho Swee, delved into history to assert the symbolic significance of the HDB's gesture:

Bukit Ho Swee was fortunate to be among the first to benefit from the first chapter of our public housing programme in the early 1960s. Today, Bukit Ho Swee is fortunate again to be the first among the steady state precincts to be offered the upgrading programme....The success in this precinct will make us once again a symbol of success and a model for others to follow.⁴⁷

⁴² A pilot upgrading programme had been carried out earlier in six other precincts in 1991-1992.

⁴³ *ST*, 28 May 1992.

⁴⁴ *ST*, 19 Oct 1993.

⁴⁵ HDB, *Annual Report 1993/1994*, p. 36; *ST*, 19 Oct 1993. The Basic Package provided for improvements to the flat, such as upgrading the toilets and installing new aluminum windows. The estimated amount a family had to pay to upgrade a 3-room flat was \$2,200 for the Basic Package, \$3,500 for the Standard Package and \$9,900 for the Standard Plus Package. *ST*, 11 Mar 1993.

⁴⁶ *ST*, 28 May 1992. The blocks were Nos. 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, and 18.

⁴⁷ *ST*, 15 Sep 1993.

The upgrading programme was supported by 91.4% of Bukit Ho Swee's residents. The residents of all the nine blocks save Block 4 opted for the less costly Standard Package because the additional living space was no longer needed by the smaller families now in residence.⁴⁸ The upgrading work began in 1994 and was completed the following year. A further 1,078 units of 2- and 3-room flats in seven housing blocks in Jalan Bukit Ho Swee were targeted for upgrading in 1995, and 86% of the residents voted for the Standard Plus Package, which provided for an additional utility room and new laundry racks.⁴⁹ Yeo Ning Hong lauded as 'sensible' and 'pragmatic' the majority's choice to treat housing as an investment to raise the flat's resale value.⁵⁰ In the following year, nine more blocks in Beo Crescent were similarly selected for upgrading.⁵¹

Nevertheless, the discourses of social rejuvenation and of leveraging investment ignored the implications of the upgrading for many elderly residents. The upgrading was practically useful in providing, for example, lifts which either stopped at every floor or more frequently than before, an important improvement for elderly residents living on the upper floors who had difficulty with the stairs.⁵² But the explicit connection between the housing upgrading and social revitalisation remained unclear, as many elderly residents would still have remained in the estate without such improvements.⁵³ Indeed, for them, the neighbourhood and sense of community was already socially-established. One resident, who had once thought of moving out, had decided to remain because of her old friends still living there; the upgrading would be more useful, she explained, to help persuade her children to continue to reside with her.⁵⁴

In 1995, the upgrading programme came under the auspices of the HDB's Estate Renewal Strategy, whereby another improvement plan, the Selective En Bloc Redevelopment Scheme (SERS), was launched. The stated aim, again, was to reinvigorate older housing estates and cater to the long-term needs of the residents.

⁴⁸ *ST*, 19 Oct 1993. The residents of Block 4 voted for an additional toilet-cum-bathroom in the flat.

⁴⁹ The blocks were Nos. 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, and 32.

⁵⁰ *ST*, 13 Apr 1995.

⁵¹ The blocks were Nos. 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 44, 46, 48, and 50.

⁵² Author's interviews with Lim Yock Eng, 25 Jul 2007; and Tan Peng Kiat, 26 Jul 2007.

⁵³ *ST*, 15 Sep 1993.

⁵⁴ *ST*, 7 Apr 1995.

The method used, however, was different: where the MUP had sought to keep residents in upgraded housing, the SERS allowed the government to repossess the flat through the Land Acquisition Act and move the residents into replacement units. Under the SERS, selected blocks of housing which were not considered 'economically or functionally viable' were to be demolished to make way for redevelopment, with the residents offered financial incentives to move into larger 99-year lease units in the locality, where they could, it was argued, maintain their community ties.⁵⁵ The Minister for National Development, Lim Hng Kiang, in explaining the need to carry out this relentless pursuit of modernity in the name of progress, stated that 'adjust we must. If we had not adjusted to the redevelopment programme for farmers and squatters, we would not have been able to build modern Singapore'.⁵⁶ The analogy was a historically apt one, for the SERS was an updated version of the government's compulsory acquisition of land for development in the 1960s. The residents, the HDB assured, were overwhelmingly in favour of the scheme.⁵⁷ Subsequently, the Board announced the acquisition of mostly 3-room flats in the locality: at Boon Tiong Road in 1995, Kim Tian Road and Nile Road in 1997, Jalan Membina Barat and Lower Delta Road in 1998,⁵⁸ and Taman Ho Swee, Havelock Road and Zion Road in 2003.⁵⁹

In a preliminary poll of 70 residents living in SIT flats at Boon Tiong Road in 1995, however, 42 were lukewarm towards the en bloc scheme. One resident protested that 'what we are being asked to give up is the quaint charm and exclusivity of our estate and that is intangible', while another was 'disillusioned' that the government had simply acquired the site by law without giving her the chance to vote on it.⁶⁰ The SERS was altogether a programme envisioned by the young to benefit the young. Many elderly persons lacked the financial means to

⁵⁵ HDB, *Annual Report 1995/1996*, pp. 42-43; and *Annual Report 1997/1998*, pp. 40. The incentives include replacement flats at subsidised prices and the waiver of various fees for the purchase.

⁵⁶ *ST*, 4 Sep 1995.

⁵⁷ Informal surveys by the HDB in 1995 showed that 93% of the respondents supported the scheme and 91% opted for replacement flats. HDB, *Annual Report 1995/1996*, p. 43.

⁵⁸ HDB, Selective En Bloc Redevelopment Scheme, Completed Sites, http://www101.hdb.gov.sg/hdbvsf/eampu200.nsf/0/Site_Completed.htm, accessed 15 Apr 2008. The blocks affected by SERS were Blocks 1-16 at Boon Tiong Road, Blocks 126-127 at Kim Tian Road, Blocks 51, 53 & 54 at Nile Road, Blocks 102 & 103 at Lower Delta Road, and Blocks 24, 31 & 32 at Jalan Membina Barat.

⁵⁹ The blocks were Blocks 29, 31 & 33 at Havelock Road and Taman Ho Swee.

⁶⁰ *ST*, 15 Sep 1993.

afford the prices of the replacement flats in the locality.⁶¹ A 78-year-old resident, when told that the replacement flats would be ready within three years, replied, 'We are too old to uproot and move to a new area...we are living on borrowed time'.⁶² But compared to the contested history of rehousing in the 1950s and early 1960s marked by demonstrations and protests, there was no comparable resistance against eviction in present-day Singapore. The state's determined mobilisation of residents in support of both the upgrading and en bloc schemes meant that dissenting voices would simply be drowned out by the pragmatic and socially-mobilised majority. A HDB survey of 890 households affected by SERS in 2000 and 2001 found that 85% supported the scheme when it was first announced and 90% were in favour by the time they moved into the replacement flats.⁶³

To bring the historical development of Bukit Ho Swee full circle, the estate in the present-day has changed radically from the dense clusters of emergency flats which had first emerged from the ashes of the 1961 fire, and will undoubtedly continue to do so. Close to the ageing albeit upgraded multi-storey HDB flats built in the 1960s are new blocks of housing which architecturally dwarf them in height, size and design. In 1991, an area of nearly 25,000 square feet at Jalan Membina, on which the 1-room emergency flats had formerly stood, was released for the construction of private condominiums.⁶⁴ The resulting visually awkward mix of public and private housing, again couched in the language of 'revitalisation', has created towering HDB point-blocks at Boon Tiong Road and Jalan Membina as well as majestic condominium complexes like Emerald Park, situated next to Kim Seng Community Centre, Central Green along Jalan Membina, and, MeraPrime at Bukit Ho Swee Crescent. The stated reason for the combined mixed housing types was so that 'even though the parents [living in smaller public housing] were poor, the children can learn from the richer families' children and upgrade themselves'.⁶⁵ Where once people desired to reside on the ground, 'living in the sky' had become the aspirational preference, with the upper-storey flats fetching higher prices. A massive, multi-storey shopping plaza and an underground train station have also

⁶¹ *ST*, 24 Aug 1995.

⁶² *ST*, 9 Sep 1995.

⁶³ HDB, Selective En Bloc Redevelopment Scheme, Residents' Response, http://www101.hdb.gov.sg/hdbvsf/eampu200.nsf/0/resident_response.htm, accessed 15 Apr 2008.

⁶⁴ *ST*, 29 Nov 1991.

⁶⁵ Author's interview with Liu Thai Ker, 14 Dec 2006.

been built at the former site of the emergency flats between Tiong Bahru Road and Jalan Membina. As this study is being undertaken, construction work has also begun at the open space between Havelock Road and Ganges Avenue, again, where 1-room flats had once stood, and at Kim Tian Road for the replacement housing for residents affected by the en bloc scheme. Bukit Ho Swee's proximity to the Central Area meant that its land would be ultimately coveted for future development in the same way as the old kampong, cemetery and fire sites had been in the late 1950s and 1960s. Demolition and rebuilding in the name of the state would, as had occurred in the past, serve as the springboard for reconstituting Bukit Ho Swee as the new century dawned.



Plate 9.2: The proximate spot where the 1961 inferno started, now the site of Zhangde Primary School and surrounded by newer high-rise HDB housing, 2006 (Photograph by author).



Plate 9.3: A mix of unchanged private and redeveloped public architecture, 2006. The MCA shophouse and the upgraded façade of Block 40 behind it (Photograph by author).



Plate 9.4: Block 34 along Jalan Bukit Ho Swee, 2006. The 'attachment' to the centre of the block, for lifts which stop at more floors, is a telltale sign of upgraded HDB flats (Photograph by author).



Plate 9.5: Flats in Taman Ho Swee selected for en bloc redevelopment, 2006. Most of the residents have already moved out (Photograph by author).



Plate 9.6: Ongoing construction of new HDB flats for residents in the locality affected by the SERS, 2008. Comprising 25, 35, 36, 38 and 40-storey housing, these replacement flats are targeted for completion in the third quarter of 2011 and will tower over the 16-storey Block 22 in the background, which had been the highest HDB housing block in the estate in the 1960s (Courtesy of James Seah).



Plate 9.7: The unrelenting pursuit of architectural modernity in Singapore, 2007. The upgraded HDB flats of Jalan Klinik, built in the early 1960s, are dwarfed by MeraPrime Condominium across the road (Photograph by author).



Plate 9.8: A place name error. The massive Tiong Bahru Plaza, a multi-purpose ‘one-stop’ shopping mall, located at the junction of Jalan Membina and Tiong Bahru Road, where the emergency flats of Bukit Ho Swee Estate had previously stood, 2007. The Mass Rapid Transit system’s Tiong Bahru station is located underground (Photograph by author).

However, the relentless pursuit of progress has had serious repercussions for the estate's long-time residents. They have retained the social perceptions of space and distance traditionally associated with Chinese kampong and shophouse dwellings of the past, but have by now lived in the community for two generations. The government has focussed on providing strategic financial assistance to residents affected by the constant demolition and upgrading programmes. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, maintaining in 1991 that it was more expensive to upgrade old housing than to demolish it and build new ones, assured residents that they would receive adequate financial compensation or government subsidies to obtain new flats.⁶⁶ To many residents, however, demolition and en bloc development meant involuntary relocation and disruption of well-established neighbourly and community ties.⁶⁷ Lim You Meng, who was born in Kampong Bukit Ho Swee and still lives in Nile Road, explained his attachment to the area: 'I am quite contented. I will stay here forever, I will not move elsewhere. It's convenient to go anywhere, the transport is convenient. They wanted to give me a flat in Jurong West but I rejected it, it's too far'.⁶⁸ Tan Ah Poh, who previously lived in a 1-room flat in Nile Road and still visits Bukit Ho Swee regularly, asked, 'Who is going to accept [rehousing] if you have been staying here for so long, the facilities all planned, so convenient?'⁶⁹ Tay Seng Kee (born 1932) and his wife have lived in Block 22 since being evicted from a wooden house in Toa Payoh in 1965; although their friends had repeatedly asked them to buy a bigger flat, Tay had refused, because, as he explained, 'it is very convenient here. The transportation system is very good, and you can easily get to town from here'.⁷⁰ Similarly, Ong Chye Ho, who lived in 1-room units in Jalan Bukit Ho Swee and Havelock Road since the 1961 fire and currently resides at Indus Road, maintained, 'It is good to live here, or else how could I have lived here for more than 30 years? I won't move anymore, I will continue to stay here'.⁷¹ Wang Ah Tee, now living in Kim Tian Road, still frequents the coffeeshops at the bottom of Block 4, Jalan Bukit

⁶⁶ *ST*, 19 Aug 1991.

⁶⁷ *ST*, 24 Aug 1991.

⁶⁸ Author's interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

⁶⁹ Author's interview with Tan Ah Poh, 29 May 2007.

⁷⁰ Author's interview with Mr and Mrs Tay Seng Kee, 26 Jul 2007.

⁷¹ Author's interview with Ong Chye Ho, 14 Feb 2007.

Ho Swee, where former and present residents of the estate still gather. He explained, 'If I go to other places, I won't be comfortable. Here, I sit down, and there are many old friends. You can order coffee, have a plate of rice, and your friends will look for you here'.⁷²



Plate 9.9: Ong Chye Ho's 'pillar space' at Block 79, Indus Road, in Hara Takafumi's 'Signs of Memory: HDB Spaces, 2006' Public Art Installation, 2006. Note Ong's reflection on his repeated moves of residence after the Bukit Ho Swee fire, which captures the shared experience of intra-urban migration, both voluntary and forced, of families in postwar modern Singapore (Photograph by author).

⁷² Author's interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007.



Plate 9.10: HDB flats along Jalan Bukit Ho Swee, built after the 1961 fire, 2007. At the bottom of the picture are a coffee shop and a recreational corner, where I spoke to Tan Tiam Ho and Wang Ah Tee, among others (photograph by author).

These comments demonstrate the complex relationship between the modern public housing and basic community dynamics. In the late 1960s and 1970s, both local and foreign scholars criticised the HDB's failure to forge a viable community in its housing estates but more recent research has shown that the social impact of rehousing varied according to gender, occupation and age.⁷³ From a larger perspective, the dissipation of area-based communities in the PAP era owed more to the transformation of what had once been a casual labour force engaged in the informal sector to one employed in routine industrial work than to the en masse relocation of kampong and shophouse dwellers in public housing per se.⁷⁴ One also needs to bear in mind that the Chinese urban kampong community was itself highly-urbanised and pragmatically-oriented, and that the wooden house dwellers, including

⁷³ Chua Beng Huat, 'Resettling a Chinese Village', *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 63-68.

⁷⁴ Author's interview with Chua Beng Huat, 9 Oct 2006.

the Bukit Ho Swee fire victims, had largely been relocated en bloc in modern housing and frequently resided together in the same high rise blocks.⁷⁵

The ethnographic evidence gathered in this study suggests that some semblance of the traditional way of life of the kampong community, when measured against specific criteria, has managed to survive in modern public housing. For instance, residents in 3-room flats in Block 22 exhibited considerable neighbourliness, although this was based on outward acts like greetings, social visits and borrowing of items of daily use, which have also been construed by the HDB as a gauge of community in its estates.⁷⁶ Lim Yock Eng, who has resided in the block since 1964, emphasised that her neighbours had always greeted and helped one another, despite the number of families moving in and out of the block over time.⁷⁷ There were signs of neighbourliness too in other blocks of housing. As Lee Soo Seong, who lived in a 2-room flat in Bukit Ho Swee for several years, recounted, 'We got along very well with our neighbours. We seldom closed our doors. The neighbours were all very simple folk from the same area and spoke the same dialect'.⁷⁸ Tay Ah Chuan, who resided in a 3-room flat in Block 32, agreed that because his neighbours were previously from the same kampong, they never shut their doors.⁷⁹

More crucially, however, the policies of the high-modernist PAP state made the existence of an *autonomous, self-contained* community in Bukit Ho Swee virtually impossible. In 1965, the HDB had declared that '[a] new housing estate is not made up of bricks and mortar', but rather 'must be given life, a heart and a will'. The Board organised social activities such as sports, games and dances in order to bring families into closer contact with one another.⁸⁰ In 1968 and 1969 respectively, the HDB launched the 'Cleanest Estate' and 'Keep Singapore Mosquito Free'

⁷⁵ Author's interviews with Alan Choe, 27 Nov 2006, and with Liu Thai Ker, 14 Dec 2006.

⁷⁶ See Yeung Yue Man & Stephen H. K. Yeh, 'A Review of Neighbourhoods and Neighbouring Practices'; and Chang Chen Tung, 'A Sociological Study of Neighbourliness', in Stephen H. K. Yeh (ed.) *Public Housing in Singapore: A Multidisciplinary Study* (Singapore: Singapore University Press for Housing and Development Board, 1975); and Yeh, *Housing and Development Board Sample Household Survey*, Vol. 2, p. 75.

⁷⁷ Author's interview with Lim Yock Eng, 25 Jul 2007.

⁷⁸ Author's interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

⁷⁹ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

⁸⁰ HDB, *Annual Report 1965*, p. 66.

campaigns to socialise the occupants into becoming model residents.⁸¹ In Bukit Ho Swee, as elsewhere in Singapore, the PAP government co-opted grassroots leaders and local businessmen into the community centres' management committees, the constituency's Citizens' Consultative Committee and the Residents' Committees. These key local committees functioned as the government's 'ears' and 'voice' at the grassroots level in order to mobilise and obtain feedback from the residents.⁸² As Seah Mui Kok, the Member of Parliament for Bukit Ho Swee, explained, the Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre's main aim was to mould residents into 'good and loyal citizens of Singapore'.⁸³ Much of this grassroots policy was to be accomplished through social campaigns such as family planning, encouraging the use of Mandarin and the moderate use of water, and reducing the incidence of 'killer litter'.⁸⁴ But such officially-sanctioned activities were not always well-received. The community centres, for instance, offered courses in sewing and cooking but women were frequently more interested to learn a handicraft such as making plastic flowers or pasting paper bags and earn some money.⁸⁵ There was resistance, too, against the Speak Mandarin campaign directed against the use of Chinese dialects among the older residents, which evoked angry protests from even members of the local committees.⁸⁶

The drastic need to implement such measures illustrates the difficulty the state faced of forging an ideal-typic community from above. In fact, it was far easier for the HDB to concentrate on simply enforcing its rules, given the unwillingness of the residents to regulate one another.⁸⁷ In 1966, the Board's Housing Inspectors, who periodically visited the flats, identified the Bukit Ho Swee and Tanjong Rhu estates, where families from the clearance areas had been rehoused in specific housing blocks, as 'the worst where infringements of tenancies were concerned',

⁸¹ HDB, *Annual Report 1969*, p. 74.

⁸² Chan Heng Chee, *The Dynamics of PAP Dominance: The PAP at the Grassroots* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1976), pp. 186-87; OHC, interview with Tang Kan Hoy, 27 Apr 2005.

⁸³ Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre, *Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre Official Opening Souvenir Magazine*, 31st July 1982 (Singapore: Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre, 1982), p. 9.

⁸⁴ Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre, *Bukit Ho Swee Newsletter*, 1 (1), Mar 1980 and 4 (1), May 1984; OHC, interview with Tang Kan Hoy, 27 Apr 2005.

⁸⁵ *ST*, 17 Jun 1972.

⁸⁶ OHC, interview with Tang Kan Hoy, 27 Apr 2005.

⁸⁷ Aline K. Wong, Ooi Giok Ling & Rennis S. Ponniah, 'Dimensions of HDB Community', in Ong Jin Hui, Tong Chee Kiong & Tan Ern Ser (eds), *Understanding Singapore Society* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1997), pp. 458-63.

where the '[c]leanliness of common staircases, and open spaces were difficult to maintain, turfing, trees and other plants were periodically destroyed'. The Board was forced to separate such evicted families, relocating them on alternate floors in the future.⁸⁸ A study of residents in 1-room flats in Bukit Merah in the early 1970s found that Housing Inspectors typically took a 'policing' approach in their work, which merely enhanced the residents' 'fear and avoidance' of authority.⁸⁹ Consequently, the dwellers in 1-room flats, who arguably had the greatest need, had the least contact with the inspectors and were consequently resigned to accepting their housing problems as an intrinsic part of their lives.⁹⁰

Independent efforts by non-government institutions or individuals to organise Bukit Ho Swee's residents were firmly discouraged by the authorities. The most salient example of this was the attempt at community organisation by Sister Sabine Fernandez of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary and a pioneer in the Bukit Ho Swee Community Service Project in 1969-1970. Aided by church and university volunteers, Sister Fernandez sought to galvanise the residents in five blocks of 1-room emergency flats into a socially-conscious community; one which could collectively bargain with the authorities over two housing problems: the damaged communal toilets and rat infestation. The residents, according to Fernandez, had hitherto 'crawled' individually to the local HDB Area Office for help but had been repeatedly ignored. When she first visited the 1-room homes, the children had rudely called her '*Bang Kali*' (Hokkien corruption of 'Bengali'), but Fernandez and her volunteers eventually convinced the adults that they were sincerely trying to help the residents solve their own sanitation and hygiene problems. She organised nightly meetings of residents, where men, and women, who were frequently flat-bound and most badly affected by the toilet and rat problems, actively participated in the discussions. Fernandez's efforts were successful – the toilets were repaired and the rats removed – but this autonomous demonstration of 'people's power' startled the authorities. The HDB Area Office accused her of trying to belittle their efforts in the eyes of the public and warned that her name was 'on the Prime Minister's desk'.

⁸⁸ HDB, *Annual Report 1966*, p. 54.

⁸⁹ Riaz Hassan, *Families in Flats: A Study of Low Income Families in Public Housing* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1977), pp. 56-57.

⁹⁰ Riaz Hassan, Social Status and Bureaucratic Contacts among the Public Housing Tenants in Singapore, Occasional paper, No. 10, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1972, pp. 7, 12; Yeh, *Housing and Development Board Sample Household Survey*, Vol. III, p. 44.

Harassment of the Community Service Project by government officials followed. Plainclothes police once interrupted a meeting to check the residents' identification cards, before telling Fernandez, 'See, Sister, they can use you. They are communists [members of the Barisan Sosialis]'. In 1970, Fernandez, weakened by a persistent injury, left the project, which died a natural death.⁹¹

The absence of a vibrant community which extended beyond simple gestures of good neighbourliness was most clearly exemplified in acts of what the authorities termed vandalism and anti-social behaviour committed in the estate's public spaces. The kampong's public spaces had been intrinsic to everyday life, being either an extension of the wooden house or a publicly-sanctioned, natural point of social and economic activity. By contrast, the HDB estate's public spaces were typically socially engineered and planned, according to a geometric order, and consequently much less deeply embedded in social life.⁹² Urination in the lifts was, for example, particularly prevalent in Bukit Ho Swee, Kallang and MacPherson estates in the 1960s and 1970s. In the former, Blocks 2 and 4 experienced numerous cases of urination in lifts daily. The reason was not, as the HDB initially believed, the absence of a public toilet, for when the Board built them, the toilets themselves became the targets of vandals, with their cisterns damaged, wash basins broken, taps stolen, and the water in the toilets used illegally by hawkers. To the unsavoury smell of urine in the lifts was then added the stench of unflushed feces in the latrines, since people continued to use the squat pans, particularly unbearable for families living near the toilets. The HDB, admitting the experiment as a 'total failure', demolished the toilets. The Board blamed the problem on children and 'pranksters', and 'squatters and fire victims'.⁹³ These were, as a national radio programme stated in 1972, the people who needed more time to adjust to public housing.⁹⁴ In reality, the anti-social behaviour was a powerful sign of the social dislocation caused by having to move from a kampong into a high-rise modernist housing estate, a place where

⁹¹ Author's interview with Sabine Fernandez, 1 Aug 2007. According to Fernandez, there were similar attempts to mobilise HDB tenants in Toa Payoh and Jurong. Her efforts in Bukit Ho Swee represented the beginning of the work of the Bukit Ho Swee Community Service Project.

⁹² Chua, *Political Legitimacy and Housing*, pp. 76-85.

⁹³ HB 339/51 Vol. II, Minutes of Meeting, 6 Nov 1969; and Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to PS, MND, 31 Oct 1969; *SPD*, 22 Mar 1979, pp. 1057.

⁹⁴ RCS, audio programme titled *Then and Now (No. 1): A Look At Housing*, broadcast on 16 Sep 1972.

nobody was prepared to accept communal responsibility in maintaining the estate's public spaces.

'Tong Kor': Work and Resignation to Poverty

Despite its modern façade, Bukit Ho Swee Estate remained a low-income and economically-marginalised community as it had been during the kampong era prior to the 1961 inferno. The HDB's 1969 household survey found that 44% of the estate's households were earning an average monthly income of \$200 or less, compared to the national average of 32%, with 952 out of 1,396 income-earners in the estate employed as labourers and transport, production and service workers. In the same survey, the percentage of households in Bukit Ho Swee who did not own the following luxury items was higher than the national average: radio, television and telephone (50% vs. the national average of 36%); refrigerator and air-conditioner (64% vs. 49%); and cars and vans (95% vs. 89%).⁹⁵ In 1970, only 36% of Bukit Ho Swee's population aged 10 and older were economically active, compared to the national average of 47%. The estate's employment figure was high (86%) but lower than the national average of 90%.⁹⁶ The HDB-commissioned study of its tenants in seven estates in 1972, which generally found the residents satisfied with public housing, ranked Bukit Ho Swee with the second lowest average monthly household income of only \$258 in Singapore, against an average of \$318 for all areas. The amount, however, represented an 18% increase from the household income before the families had moved into Bukit Ho Swee, against an increase of 29% for all areas. The study also found the estate's residents dissatisfied with their employment status, household expenditure, prices of goods, and contact with relatives and friends.⁹⁷

In this early phase of the development of public housing, former Bukit Ho Swee fire victims often lived at the margins of society. Having lost most of their

⁹⁵ Yeh, *Housing and Development Board Sample Household Survey*, Vol. I, pp. 18, 27, 66; and Vol. III, pp. 20, 28, 36-37.

⁹⁶ Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970, Singapore*, p. 433.

⁹⁷ Stephen H. K. Yeh, *Homes for the People: A Study of Tenants' Views on Public Housing in Singapore* (Singapore: Government Printing Office, 1972), pp. 34, 101, 109.

worldly possessions in the 1961 inferno and frequently lacking a regular source of income, they commonly incurred rent arrears. These families experienced repeated, frustrating encounters with HDB officials attempting to recover the arrears and in extreme cases, taking action to evict them for continued non-payment.⁹⁸ A family allocated a temporary 2-room flat at Kim Tian Road in June 1961 sank into arrears when the male breadwinner fell ill and lost his job. The family accumulated arrears over a six-month period before quitting the tenancy. By 1972, the widow of the deceased, then working as an odd-job labourer, was still unable to repay the arrears.⁹⁹ Another family, allocated a temporary flat in Queenstown in the same year, also failed to settle their arrears after the male breadwinner was arrested for crime and given three prison sentences. The family subsequently moved into a 1-room emergency flat at Tiong Bahru Road for two and a half years. When the wife passed away in 1968, the children were sent to a home, and by 1971, the arrears were deemed not recoverable.¹⁰⁰ Another fire victim, a part-time lorry-driver living in a 1-room unit in Queenstown, terminated his tenancy after only six months and moved into an attap house in Kampong Henderson, where the HDB rent collectors pursued him, until this dwelling was demolished and he then became untraceable.¹⁰¹

Other families simply abandoned their emergency flats when the HDB instituted action to evict them for not paying long-standing arrears. This forced mobility to seek affordable housing, while seemingly similar to low-income Chinese families changing residence in the 1950s, was now taking place within the closely-circumscribed public housing sector. In several dramatic cases, former fire victim families which lost their breadwinners suddenly vacated their homes without notifying the HDB. A resident, evicted from a 1-room flat at Jalan Bukit Ho Swee in 1965 for continued non-payment of arrears, fled repeatedly from the Board's rent collectors; his last known address was a wooden house in Jurong, before he vanished, permanently, from the reach of the housing officials.¹⁰² A family living in a 2-room

⁹⁸ The HDB's standard practice for unemployed or financially strapped tenants to pay the arrears in installments or to transfer them to lower-rent accommodation. Eviction was a last resort only for households who regularly incurred arrears despite having the means to pay. Ng Boon Ong, 'Decentralised System of Housing Management of Large Housing Estate', in *2nd Afro-Asian Housing Congress* (Singapore, 1967), pp. 6-7.

⁹⁹ HB 461/53 Vol. V, Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 14 Jan 1972.

¹⁰⁰ HB 461/53 Vol. V, Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 16 Dec 1971.

¹⁰¹ HB 461/53 Vol. V, Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 27 Nov 1971.

¹⁰² HB 461/53 Vol. V, Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 11 Aug 1971.

flat at Jalan Bukit Ho Swee, already in arrears for four years, abruptly ‘abandoned’ the premises in 1966 after the HDB took action to evict them; the Board traced the family to a wooden house at Carey Road but they also disappeared from the official gaze.¹⁰³ Another family quit their 1-room flat in the same area and was also traced to a wooden dwelling at Carey Road, which now served as a refuge of sorts for families displaced from public housing. The 1968 fire, however, obliterated this family’s wooden house and any trace of their final whereabouts.¹⁰⁴

By 1980, the percentage of Bukit Ho Swee’s economically active population had risen to 56%, with 96% in employment, figures similar to the national averages.¹⁰⁵ This was helped in large measure by the expansion of the nation’s industrialisation programme in the late 1960s and the early 1970s.¹⁰⁶ There was, in particular, a rising level of female employment over time. In 1970, nearly three-quarters of both the economically active and employed persons in Bukit Ho Swee were male.¹⁰⁷ By 1990, however, two-fifths of the estate’s economically active population were women.¹⁰⁸ The greater female participation in the workforce underlined the emergence of the nuclear family as an economic unit. Women’s chances of finding employment were constantly improving at this time. In 1970, only 77% of economically active women in Singapore were employed but the figure a decade later was 97%.¹⁰⁹ By 1990, in two-fifths of the married couples in Singapore, both the husband and wife were working, with an average household income of \$3,557, much higher than incomes when only the husband or wife was working (\$1,778 and \$1,171 respectively).¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, female economic participation was lower in Bukit Ho Swee, where women continued to comprise the bulk of economically inactive persons, accounting for two thirds in both 1970 and 1990, mostly as homemakers.¹¹¹

¹⁰³ HB 461/53 Vol. V, Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 17 Sep 1971.

¹⁰⁴ HB 461/53 Vol. V, Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 18 Aug 1971.

¹⁰⁵ Khoo, *Census of Population 1980, Singapore: Release No. 5 Geographical Distribution*, pp. 60.

¹⁰⁶ W. G. Huff, *The Economic Growth of Singapore: Trade and Development in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 309.

¹⁰⁷ Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970, Singapore*, p. 433.

¹⁰⁸ Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Transport & Geographic Distribution*, p. 85.

¹⁰⁹ Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970, Singapore*, p. 433; Khoo, *Census of Population 1980, Singapore: Release No. 5 Geographical Distribution*, pp. 60.

¹¹⁰ Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Households & Housing*, p. 15.

¹¹¹ Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970, Singapore*, p. 433; Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Transport & Geographic Distribution*, pp. 17, 85.



Plate 9.11: Mothers and their children socialising in the day in the open space behind Block 48, Beo Crescent, c. 1980 (Courtesy of Anne Lim).

The occupations traditionally held by Bukit Ho Swee's residents were generally low-paying and only began to change for the better in the 1980s. In 1970, nearly half of the working population were labourers or production and transport workers.¹¹² Two decades later, that figure had fallen to a quarter.¹¹³ But the percentage of professionals and technicians living in the estate rose slowly from 5% in 1970 to only 13% in 1990.¹¹⁴ By 1990, the real household income in Singapore had doubled within a decade. However, the average household income in Bukit Ho Swee was \$2,479, lower than the national average of \$3,076 and nearly a quarter lower than the average for all Chinese households at \$3,213.¹¹⁵ The Member of Parliament's 'Meet the People' sessions were frequently inundated with requests pertaining to employment, hawking, and housing and rent.¹¹⁶ The need to maintain a steady income for the regular payment of rent produced tremendous stress on flat-

¹¹² Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970, Singapore*, pp. 462, 464.

¹¹³ Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Transport & Geographic Distribution*, pp. 130, 133, 136.

¹¹⁴ Arumainathan, *Report on the Census of Population 1970, Singapore*, pp. 462, 464; Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Transport & Geographic Distribution*, pp. 130, 133, 136.

¹¹⁵ Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Households & Housing*, p. 7; Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Transport & Geographic Distribution*, pp. 142, 145.

¹¹⁶ Melanie Chew, interview with Ong Pang Boon, in *Leaders of Singapore* (Singapore: Resource Press, 1996), p. 177; OHC, interview with Seah Mui Kok, 17 Jun 1994; author's interview with Tan Nam Sia, 3 May 2007.

dwellers employed in casual work. Soh Boon Quee, a daily-rated worker living in a 1-room flat in Tiong Bahru, stated,

Living in the flat, the pressure was very great. We didn't earn much so there was the pressure of paying the rent, because my pay was daily-rated. I worked initially as an electrician, then when I was in my 30s, I did casual work in a shipyard. I tell people that for five years when I was working, I never saw the sun! Because I was working from about 5 am to 11 pm.¹¹⁷

Recent research has highlighted the economic marginalisation of non-English literate Chinese factory workers in Singapore in the 1980s.¹¹⁸ In 1980, four-fifths of the estate's population aged 10 and above were literate in at least one language, slightly under the national average of 82%. Two fifths could read and write in English (higher than the national average of 35%), the language of administration and business, but a third were literate only in Chinese, while a fifth were illiterate.¹¹⁹ In 1990, the literacy rate in Bukit Ho Swee was 84%, with the English-literate population increasing to 45% of the total. Still, 37% were only Chinese literate, while 16% were illiterate.¹²⁰ The proportion of literate men was consistently greater than that of women; within the illiterate group, more than two-thirds were women in both the censuses of 1980 and 1990.¹²¹ The level of education among residents of the estate also improved slowly. In 1980, 43% of Bukit Ho Swee's population less school-going students had no formal education, compared to the national figure of 35%. Slightly more than half of the estate's population had a primary or secondary education but only 1% had a tertiary education.¹²² In 1990, a quarter of the population lacked a formal education, but nearly three quarters still

¹¹⁷ Author's interview with Soh Boon Quee, 4 Feb 2007.

¹¹⁸ Ernest Koh Wee Song, 'On the Margins of the "Economic Miracle": Non English-Literate Chinese Factory Workers in Singapore, 1980-90', *Southeast Asian Studies*, 44 (4), Mar 2007, pp. 470-74.

¹¹⁹ Khoo, *Census of Population 1980, Singapore: Release No. 5 Geographical Distribution*, pp. 66, 69.

¹²⁰ Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Transport & Geographic Distribution*, pp. 89, 93, 97.

¹²¹ Khoo, *Census of Population 1980, Singapore: Release No. 5 Geographical Distribution*, pp. 66, 69; Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Transport & Geographic Distribution*, pp. 89, 93, 97.

¹²² Khoo, *Census of Population 1980, Singapore: Release No. 5 Geographical Distribution*, p. 93.

had only a primary or secondary education, with a mere 5% having obtained a tertiary education.¹²³

This growing English economic and literacy divide was not lost on the poorer Bukit Ho Swee residents. Tan Tiam Ho, who did not receive a formal education, recalled an impassioned debate he had with his Member of Parliament in the 1960s on the government's selective family planning policy:

At the time, the newspapers were saying that to have three children, the parents must be university graduates. I couldn't read the newspapers but my friends told me that the graduates were supposed to have better minds. I couldn't stand it when I heard about it. This was unreasonable. How come our minds were bad? So I told Seah Mui Kok, 'I am not very educated, but can I ask you something? Are you growing fruit trees, durian, rambutan, and picking the better fruits?' He asked what I meant. I told him that it was unfair to favour those who were graduates, since my children were also ready to go to university. I said that the number of children should be based on whether you are able to raise them. I said, 'Fruits are fruits but people are not fruits'.¹²⁴

The economic lives and life paths of Bukit Ho Swee's residents consequently followed two different trajectories. From the late 1960s, knowledge of English became crucial in a job market which was dominated by two major work providers: the multinationals, and the civil service and government-linked corporations.¹²⁵ Because the development of the state-sponsored high-wage, capital-intensive economy in Singapore in the 1970s discriminated between those who were educated and skilled and those who were not, the income gap between these two groups widened in the 1970s and early 1980s.¹²⁶ James Seah, despite living with his family of five in a 1-room emergency flat in Bukit Ho Swee, obtained a job in the HDB and

¹²³ Lau, *Singapore Census of Population 1990: Transport & Geographic Distribution*, pp. 103, 106, 109.

¹²⁴ Author's interview with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007.

¹²⁵ Huff, *The Economic Growth of Singapore*, pp. 320-32.

¹²⁶ Janet W. Salaff, *State and Family in Singapore: Restructuring a Developing Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 262-64.

retired as a finance supervisor.¹²⁷ Likewise, Jimmy Yi was employed as a draughtsman in the Ministry of National Development,¹²⁸ while Oh Boon Eng became a surveyor and later a draughtsman with the City and Planning Department.¹²⁹ They were all English-educated individuals whose education and skills were relevant to a nation-state which was physically transforming itself, expressly in the housing sector. On the other hand, in a sociological study of 48 low-income residents in 1993, the informants expressed their condition of economic hardship as '*tong kor*', literally, 'painful bitterness'. The Hokkien term represents the strong belief that they, and even their children, would remain trapped in perpetual poverty. They were keenly aware of suffering deprivations which were inter-connected: a constant shortage of money, a lack of literacy in English, and an absence of a supportive social network of kin and friends.¹³⁰ As an informant told me, the living standards of the younger generation in the estate had improved but those of their parents had largely remained unchanged.¹³¹ The modern housing, in short, had not to any meaningful extent improved the lives of those who had once lived in 'slums of hope'. What had changed, evidently, was an increasing self-awareness of and resignation to poverty in the midst of plenty in the 1980s, a belief in '终身注定' ('life is fated').

While generally Bukit Ho Swee Estate was a low-to-middle income area, its 1-room flats continued to constitute a distinct social world where the difficulty of living with chronic economic marginalisation in modern Singapore was most acute. Although their children, if they obtained education and skills, could potentially transcend the parents' economic plight, many occupants of 1-room flats found the Singapore dream of material achievement and family bliss unattainable. In general, families residing in 1-room flats in Singapore frequently suffered from the stress of irregular incomes, rent arrears and the difficulty of approaching housing officials for

¹²⁷ Author's interview with James Seah, 21 Oct 2006.

¹²⁸ Author's interview with Jimmy Yi, 4 Feb 2007.

¹²⁹ Author's interview with Oh Boon Eng, 4 Apr 2007.

¹³⁰ Heng Chee Meng, Documents of Poverty: The Case of Bukit Ho Swee, unpublished academic exercise, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, 1994, pp. 26-32.

¹³¹ Author's interview with Tan Ah Poh, 29 May 2007.

help on these issues.¹³² A study of such low-income residents in Bukit Merah Estate in the early 1970s discovered ‘serious social and psychological problems’ such as diminished contact with one’s social support network, and increased stress and health issues.¹³³ By the late 1990s, elderly, poorly-educated, economically-inactive, and low-skilled workers were still disproportionately represented among tenant households in HDB flats in Singapore.¹³⁴

The government’s upgrading programme largely bypassed the 1-room flats of Bukit Ho Swee. The one ‘improvement’ accomplished for such housing was the conversion, in 1971, of the 904 1-room emergency flats at Jalan Bukit Ho Swee into 384 self-contained 2-room units. The project, however, was poorly planned with little regard for the inconveniences inflicted on the residents. When the conversion work began suddenly without prior notice, more than half of the families were still residing in the flats because alternative housing was either too expensive or located too far away. The residents of Block 3 consequently had to endure many days of constant din and dust. As construction workers smashed down the dividing walls between the 1-room units to create a 2-room flat, they frightened sleeping babies and forced families to take their meals outside their homes.¹³⁵ When educated residents began to complain to the press about the inhospitable renovation conditions, the HDB hastily stopped the conversion and promised to first rehouse the families in flats at Ganges Avenue due for completion in early July.¹³⁶ The local authorities sought to placate the residents by organising a ‘noise pollution free’ campaign in the estate.¹³⁷ Most of the remaining 1-room flats in the estate were subsequently scheduled for demolition either in the early 1980s or the late 1990s. The government refused in 1981 to further upgrade self-contained 1-room units in Singapore, because, since these flats were pending demolition or conversion within the decade,

¹³² Myrna Blake, ‘The Built Environment and the Underprivileged’, *Solidarity*, 131/132, Jul/Dec 1991, pp. 91-95. See also official studies in the late 1970s: SCSS, *A Report of the Survey on Some Rent Arrear Families Living in One Room Housing Development Board Flats* (Singapore: Singapore Council of Social Service, 1977), and SCSS, *Report on the Social and Welfare Needs of Families Living in One and Two-room HDB Flats: Phase 1, Study of Voluntary Welfare Family Service Agencies Service Delivery* (Singapore: Council’s Research Committee, Singapore Council of Social Service, 1978).

¹³³ Hassan, *Families in Flats*, p. 17.

¹³⁴ Department of Statistics, *Tenant Households in HDB Flats*, Occasional Paper Series, No. 31, Singapore: Department of Statistics, 1997, pp. 10-11.

¹³⁵ *ST*, 2 & 3 Jun 1971.

¹³⁶ *ST*, 3 Jun 1971.

¹³⁷ *ST*, 24 Jun 1971.

upgrading only meant that ‘more money is going down the drain’.¹³⁸ Basic facilities which were necessary for elderly residents to live decently such as lifts and social and recreational amenities were consequently denied to the poorest residents. The 1-room flats in Block 33, Taman Ho Swee, were not upgraded and ‘stuck out like a sore thumb’ in the estate in the late 1990s, sorely lacking social and recreational facilities which would have enabled elderly residents to establish informal support networks.¹³⁹



Plate 9.12: The 1-room flats of Block 33, facing each other across a common corridor, 2006 (Photograph by author).

According to Roy Chan, a grassroots leader in Bukit Ho Swee, the 1-room flats frequently housed the dysfunctional families of the estate, where people quarrelled loudly with their family or neighbours and where the children frequently dropped out of school either by choice or economic necessity.¹⁴⁰ Physically, the

¹³⁸ *SPD*, 20 Mar 1981, p. 1001.

¹³⁹ BHSSSC, *Annual Report 1998*, p. 15.

¹⁴⁰ Author's interview with Roy Chan, 2 Apr 2007.

units were frequently filled with furniture and bags of old items which spilled out into the common corridor, forcing large families to share the small living space by sleeping on double-deck beds, and in the kitchens. Yap Kuai Yong, a housewife, her husband, Lai Chee Lung, a daily-rated construction worker, and her mother-in-law and three sons lived in a 1-room flat in Block 15; in the small unit, Yap and her youngest son slept on a bed, Lai and the other two boys on the floor, while the elderly lady slept in the kitchen.¹⁴¹ As Angie Ng recalled, because her 1-room emergency unit was always poorly lit and ‘gloomy’, she tried to spend as much time outside the flat as possible after finishing her housework. She often visited her classmate’s 3-room flat in Taman Ho Swee which was ‘always so nice’ by comparison. Ng later moved into an improved 1-room flat at Block 79, Indus Road, only slightly larger, but which was, to her, ‘天阴之别’ (‘vast difference’). But when she returned ‘home’ one day to the site of the emergency housing, the block had been torn down and she simply sat down on the ground and cried.¹⁴²

The communal toilets symbolised the dynamics of social life and hygiene in the emergency flats.¹⁴³ Long queues materialised each morning in front of the two toilets serving each floor of the housing block.¹⁴⁴ The toilets were not surprisingly insanitary areas; Lim You Meng, whose family had moved into an emergency flat in Block 1, remembered that once ‘we had a water shortage for nearly a whole day. So the toilet became very full and smelly but you still had to use it. You can’t imagine it’. Despite this insanitary inconvenience, Lim, then 13, was ‘very happy’ to be living in public housing, where ‘we had water and electricity and everything’.¹⁴⁵ But the communal toilets were not safe places for the women from the standpoint of sexual harassment, since the men would frequently use the women’s toilet if theirs was not working or occupied.¹⁴⁶ The toilets were also difficult to manage because residents often illegally washed their laundry there to save expenditure on public

¹⁴¹ Author’s interviews with Yap Kuai Yong and Lai Chee Lung, 16 Jun 2007.

¹⁴² Author’s interview with Angie Ng, 8 Feb 2007.

¹⁴³ The emergency housing at Jalan Bukit Ho Swee had their own kitchens while those at Jalan Membina had communal kitchens.

¹⁴⁴ Author’s interviews with James Seah, 21 Oct 2006; and with Tan Ah Poh, 29 May 2007.

¹⁴⁵ Author’s interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

¹⁴⁶ Author’s interview with Roy Chan, 2 Apr 2007. The rape-cum-murder of a girl in a communal toilet in Bukit Ho Swee in December 1966, mentioned in the previous chapter, was a widely-debated event.

utilities;¹⁴⁷ the residents who with their pails queued up daily for water in the communal toilets were in fact repeating the kampong ritual of collecting free water at the public standpipes.¹⁴⁸ At Jalan Membina, where the emergency flats had both communal toilets and kitchens, thefts of unattended cooked food and cooking utensils were common.¹⁴⁹

Quah Geok Hong's experience typifies the difficult negotiation of time and energy between family and work for a 1-room flat dweller. Divorced and lacking a formal education in the late 1960s, she brought up four children by herself in Block 33. Quah had to take on different jobs through the years, peeling bean sprouts at home or working in factories, hotels or restaurants for part of the day. When out working, she asked her eldest son or a neighbour to take care of the young children. The good 'neighbourliness' among some 1-room residents stemmed, consequently, from pragmatic need, for, she explained, 'How could I not interact with them? If anything happened to the kids, how could I cope?' Despite her heavy workload, Quah also took loans from *ah long* and participated in *hweis* to make ends meet, particularly when she incurred arrears in the monthly payment for the flat, which she had purchased. Quah did so many jobs in the process of raising her family as a single parent that she felt, 'if I was educated, I would be a manager now'. Life was, for her, very *kor*.¹⁵⁰

The Estate beyond the Law

The tensions inherent in socialising low-income public housing residents, including an 'underclass' living in the 1-room flats, into model citizens of an emergent state produced a difficult relationship between former kampong dwellers and the high modernist state. Iain Buchanan maintained as early as 1972 that Bukit Ho Swee and Kallang-Tanjong Rhu estates, which housed resettled kampong dwellers, had developed a 'split personality', where aspects of the semi-autonomous character of the kampong community persisted despite the regulations of public

¹⁴⁷ Author's interview with Angie Ng, 8 Feb 2007.

¹⁴⁸ Author's interview with Jimmy Yi, 4 Feb 2007.

¹⁴⁹ Author's interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

¹⁵⁰ Author's interview with Quah Geok Hong, 27 Jul 2007.

housing life.¹⁵¹ The authorities continued to view Bukit Ho Swee as a ‘dangerous place’. As early as 1962, when the HDB was considering tenders for building contracts on the fire site, Teh Cheang Wan, the Chief Architect, had viewed the area as ‘a bad site and full of gangsters’, where ‘[c]ontractors might allow some money for loss and theft of building materials and protection money’.¹⁵² In the late 1960s, the staff of the Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre viewed the estate’s listless youths as ‘a bad lot’ who should not be living in the same blocks of 1-room emergency flats. Similarly, the police, the principals and teachers of the schools in the locality, and the staff of the HDB Area Office perceived the estate as a ‘bad area’, notorious for gangsterism.¹⁵³

Conversely, the estate’s poorer and less-educated residents maintained a cautious, even fearful attitude towards officialdom. The residents of the 1-room flats were the most difficult to integrate into the social ethos of the developmental state; there were, in the early 1980s, still no representatives from these flats in the Residents’ Committees, compared to 77% and 11% from 3- and 4-room flats respectively.¹⁵⁴ Angie Ng recalled of police visits to the 1-room emergency flats:

If the police came, they were even more afraid of us than we were afraid of them. They would say, ‘Is this thing happening here?’ Then everybody would say, ‘I don’t know, I don’t know’. Then the police would just say, ‘OK, OK’.¹⁵⁵

The state’s attempts to control unlicensed hawking in the 1960s and early 1970s highlighted the persistence of the informal sector in the economy and a semi-autonomous ‘kampong way of life’ in Bukit Ho Swee Estate. Unlicensed hawkers were, as before the 1961 fire, drawn to such places of social and economic activity

¹⁵¹ Iain Buchanan, *Singapore in Southeast Asia: An Economic and Political Appraisal* (London: Bell, 1972), pp. 241-45.

¹⁵² ME 1129/62, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Secretary, Working Party on School Buildings, MOE, 30 Jan 1962.

¹⁵³ Lai Long Tiew, *Detached Youth Work: Jalan Bukit Ho Swee*, unpublished academic exercise, Department of Social Work and Social Administration, University of Singapore, 1970, unpaginated; OHC, interview with John Lim Hock Seng, 20 Sep 1991.

¹⁵⁴ Bukit Ho Swee Residents’ Committees, *Bukit Ho Swee RCs 3rd Term Inauguration Souvenir Magazine, 1980-1982* (Singapore: Bukit Ho Swee Residents’ Committees, 1982), p. 54.

¹⁵⁵ Author’s interview with Angie Ng, 8 Feb 2007.

as roads, carparks, pavements, bus stops, markets and schools. In the mid-1960s, the entrance to Bukit Ho Swee East and West primary schools attracted numerous hawkers, and pupils, in the early hours, at noon and in the evening.¹⁵⁶ In 1962, the HDB, viewing hawker food as insanitary and the stalls as hindering construction work and traffic flow in the estate, had decided to demolish these stalls while seeking to confine hawkers to designated sites as the longer-term solution.¹⁵⁷ The Board's demolition policy was *ultra vires*,¹⁵⁸ for the work was the responsibility of the Public Works Department, but which it had deliberately undertaken in the interest of 'preserving the good appearance of housing estates'.¹⁵⁹ The HDB's unequivocal stance against unlicensed hawking went beyond even the current policy of the Ministry of Health which, while concerned about insanitary hawker practices, nonetheless understood that hawking was not simply a vocation of the unemployed. Instead it was an occupation which both offered the prospect of success in business and rendered a valuable social service by keeping the costs of living down.¹⁶⁰

In 1963, however, the HDB's Estates Manager flatly declared Bukit Ho Swee a 'slum' due to the prevalence of illegally-erected hawker stalls in the estate and called for the hawkers to be relocated to fixed pitches at Numbers 491-561 Jalan Bukit Ho Swee.¹⁶¹ At this time, Tay Ah Chuan, having just completed his Chinese-medium secondary education, had to help his father, a lowly-paid lorry driver, support a large family of eleven. Secret society members, who were in actual fact his former primary school mates, helped him build a wooden stall along Jalan Bukit Ho Swee to sell Chinese foodstuff. Situated along the road with Tay were the stalls of more than ten former classmates, also unemployed, who sold fruits and provisions. The HDB summarily relocated them to temporary covered pitches behind Block 11

¹⁵⁶ ME 2785/62, Memo from Principal, Bukit Ho Swee East School, to Superintendent, Markets and Hawkers Department, 23 Aug 1966; and Memo from Principal, Bukit Ho Swee East School, to Traffic Police, 12 May 1964.

¹⁵⁷ HB 433/46 Vol. II, Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Estates Manager, HDB, 2 May 1963; and Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to PS, MND, 21 Apr 1965; HDB, *Annual Report 1962*, p. 46.

¹⁵⁸ 'Outside one's jurisdiction' in Latin.

¹⁵⁹ HB 433/46 Vol. II, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Director, PWD, 16 Nov 1964.

¹⁶⁰ HB 339/51 Vol. II, Minutes of Meeting, 6 Nov 1969.

¹⁶¹ HB 433/46 Vol. II, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to CEO, HDB, 22 Oct 1963; and Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Estates Manager, HDB, 2 May 1963.



Plate 9.13: Block 48, Beo Crescent, at the edge of Bukit Ho Swee Estate, year unknown. Note the hawker stalls in the open spaces below the flats, and also the laundry hung out on bamboo poles to dry (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 9.14: Jalan Bukit Ho Swee, year unknown. A hawker crosses the road with his cart, while at the bottom left of the picture is a girl with a basket and her younger sister in toll, showing the important role older children play in the family (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

later that year before permanently moving them to the Beo Crescent market.¹⁶² In July-September 1964, when the outbreak of race riots in Singapore weakened the Board's surveillance against unlicensed hawkers, what the HDB termed 'unscrupulous persons' erected unauthorised stalls in Bukit Ho Swee, Jalan Membina and Delta Road, and in other estates.¹⁶³ Two years later, the Ministry of Health and the Hawkers Department still experienced 'great difficulty' in removing unlicensed hawkers from HDB estates.¹⁶⁴ In 1967, the Board finally accepted the need to build hawker centres in its estates to cater to the residents' shopping needs, and instructed local hawkers to obtain licenses and move into these centres.¹⁶⁵ Bukit Ho Swee Estate was consequently served by a number of officially-approved hawker sites: the Beo Crescent market, which had a wet market and dry goods stalls, open-air pitches at the concourse next to the market, covered pitches off Jalan Bukit Ho Swee, and hawker centres at the foot of Block 50 and elsewhere. At the Block 50 hawker centre, for instance, priority of rent for the stalls was given to 66 persons who had previously been arrested for illegal hawking.¹⁶⁶ In 1973, the HDB established a central register of all authorised hawkers in Singapore in order to identify the outstanding unlicensed hawkers.¹⁶⁷

The official attempts to regularise hawking were carried out without consulting the hawkers themselves.¹⁶⁸ Consequently, they naturally provoked strong resistance. By 1963, the demolition of unauthorised stalls, undertaken often by the Work Brigade and led by an HDB Enforcement Officer, had become an 'everyday affair'.¹⁶⁹ The following year, acid bombs were thrown at the Board's officers in Tanjong Rhu Estate, while others were threatened or physically assaulted, leading the HDB to seek police protection and training of its officers in unarmed combat!¹⁷⁰ That year, in response to the appearance of a demolition squad in Bukit Ho Swee,

¹⁶² Author's interviews with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006 and 13 Sep 2006.

¹⁶³ HB 433/46 Vol. II, Notes of a Meeting, 6 Nov 1964; and Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 18 Nov 1964.

¹⁶⁴ HDB, *Annual Report 1966*, p. 54.

¹⁶⁵ HDB, *Annual Report 1968*, p. 35.

¹⁶⁶ HB 433/46 Vol. III, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Executive Estates Manager, HDB, 12 Feb 1966.

¹⁶⁷ HDB, *Annual Report 1972*, p. 64.

¹⁶⁸ Leong Lee Voon, *Hawkers in Singapore* (Singapore: Economic Research Centre, University of Singapore, 1976), pp. 20-21.

¹⁶⁹ HB 433/46 Vol. II, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to PS, MND, 21 Apr 1965.

¹⁷⁰ HB 433/46 Vol. II, Extracts of a Minutes of Heads of Department, 23 Nov 1964.

‘crackers were fired for about 10 minutes to obstruct and deter the demolition, and in spite of adequate police protection a glass bottle was thrown in the midst of the demolition squad but fortunately without causing any injury’.¹⁷¹ Shoppers frequently sympathised with the hawkers by helping them push their stalls away to safety during raids.¹⁷² In 1965, there were still 255 hawker stalls in Bukit Ho Swee awaiting demolition.¹⁷³ Wang Ah Tee, a resident of Block 2 who had joined the Work Brigade, took part in the demolition operations, which were, as he explained, no less than miniature ‘wars’:

In the morning, a lorry would take me to Geylang and Kallang with a *parang* and a hammer. If someone had set up an unauthorised hawker stall or an unauthorised house, I had to hack it down. I was very frightened because you could get beaten up. There was only a policeman accompanying us, three lorries of workers. We demolished hawkers stalls with our hammers. We finished work at 2 plus in the afternoon. The Work Brigade was messy, full of *pai kia* [‘gangsters’]. No choice, if you had work, you just had to do it.¹⁷⁴

In 1973, the Board revealed that its officers were experiencing ‘a declining number of assault cases’ due to the presence of a police escort.¹⁷⁵ But this did not mean that the raids were successful; in fact the Ministry of Health viewed the ‘periodic raiding on hawkers’ as ‘one of the worst possible systems of control of hawkers’, since sentinels organised by gangsters would ‘usually look out for the raiding and disappear before the raiding party arrived at the scene’, with the result that it was usually the old hawkers, who elicited the greatest public sympathy, who were detained. The Ministry consequently decided in 1969 that the raids be carried out in the afternoon between 3-6 am to ‘avoid adverse comments’ from the public.¹⁷⁶ Not surprisingly, hawker inspectors came to be infamously known to the

¹⁷¹ HB 433/46 Vol. II, Memo from Estates Manager, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 18 Nov 1964.

¹⁷² Author’s interview with Zhou Lian Che, 21 Feb 2006.

¹⁷³ HB 433/46 Vol. III, Memo from Assistant Commissioner of Police to CEO, HDB, 14 Jan 1965. Plans made to demolish the stalls on 14-15 January were called off on the 14th. There is no report of subsequent demolition attempts.

¹⁷⁴ Author’s interview with Wang Ah Tee, 22 Jan 2007.

¹⁷⁵ HDB, *Annual Report 1972*, p. 64.

¹⁷⁶ HB 433/46 Vol. III, Memo from Acting CEO, HDB, to Estates Manager, HDB, 8 May 1969.

Chinese population as *tey gu* ('earth bulls'), which stemmed from the high-handed manner in which they arrested old hawkers and destroyed their stalls.¹⁷⁷

Underpinning the government's hardline hawker policy was a pragmatic aim to eradicate the unlicensed hawking which had characterised work in late-colonial Singapore. This was part of the PAP's plan to channel casual labour into regular factory work in order to accelerate the development of the industrialisation programme.¹⁷⁸ The constant raids and demolitions were consequently part of a structural attack on the occupation designed to make it less attractive to the low-income population, which also included raising the fees for licenses and for using public utilities in hawker centres and shopping centres.¹⁷⁹ In 1970, Chua Sian Chin, the Minister of Health, denied that the new license fees, which required hawkers to pay the fees in lump sums for three months, were causing them undue hardship. Instead, he complained that many hawkers had turned down skilled and semi-skilled factory jobs at the government-sponsored Jurong Industrial Estate because the location was considered too far away.¹⁸⁰

Consequently, the authorities' hawker policy disadvantaged both hawkers and their clients. The HDB's preoccupation with zoning space-use in the estate, which was indicative of the high modernist philosophy of the late colonial Master Plan, separated hawkers from residential premises. Such planning, however, clashed with the deeply-embedded cultural role of hawkers in the community. In the early 1970s, hawkers relocated from Block 27 in Jalan Bukit Ho Swee to the Beo Crescent concourse were suffering a 50% reduction in their daily earnings (from \$5 to \$2-3) and were struggling to support their families. They had to compete with stallholders in the adjoining market and follow a two-shift system which reduced their working hours; in contrast, when they had hawked their food and wares below Block 27, the residents could simply ask their children to purchase the food downstairs.¹⁸¹ The determined campaign against unlicensed hawkers also removed a convenient source of inexpensive food for the residents. When the first permanent hawker centres were

¹⁷⁷ *SPD*, 25 Mar 1970, pp. 1137-39.

¹⁷⁸ Garry Rodan, *The Political Economy of Singapore's Industrialisation: National State and International Capital* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

¹⁷⁹ Leong, *Hawkers in Singapore*, p. 26.

¹⁸⁰ *SPD*, 25 Mar 1970, pp. 1135-36.

¹⁸¹ *SPD*, 2 Aug 1971, pp. 120-121.

built in the estate in the mid-1960s, Lee Soo Seong was amazed that ‘we must go so far to a hawker centre to eat?’¹⁸²

Another illegal economic activity which persisted during the 1960s in the HDB estates was the pirate taxis. These unauthorised ‘cabs’ continued to ply along Havelock Road and were regarded by the principal of Bukit Ho Swee East School as a traffic menace for travelling ‘at excessive speed with a complete disregard for all traffic rules’.¹⁸³ The authorities, as they did with the hawkers, sought to register pirate taxi drivers. By the mid-1960s, the number of licensed taxis in Singapore had doubled from 1,559 in 1956 to 3,206 in 1965.¹⁸⁴ But the illegal taxis remained in demand throughout the decade, simply because they were faster and cheaper than buses. In 1965, there were an estimated 61,000 school children using at least 4,000 pirate taxis, comparable to the figure in the colonial period.¹⁸⁵ When he was 16, Goh Soon Leng, who lived in a 1-room emergency flat in Bukit Ho Swee, worked for twelve years as an agent for pirate taxis which ran trips between Singapore and Kuala Lumpur; the syndicate, he said, received the protection of the secret societies.¹⁸⁶

The official regulation of the use of public space in the estate drove unauthorised, informal economic activity into HDB flats and shops. Some families continued to keep a few chickens in the flat or, if they were living on the ground floor, in the open grass around the block, bringing them back to the flat only at night.¹⁸⁷ Other families sold tidbits, fruits, cooked noodles, or soft drinks at home, or charged their neighbours five cents to watch television in the flat, continuing the Chinese custom of combining residential and commercial space use.¹⁸⁸ Women would also sew clothes or did other piece-rated handicraft work at home. If not actually serving as a business premise, the flat could also be used for preparing food such as *kan chia mee* (‘noodles on a cart’) and *cheng tng* which would be sold at the

¹⁸² OHC, interview with Lee Soo Seong, 19 Nov 1996.

¹⁸³ ME 2785/62, Memo from Principal, Bukit Ho Swee East School, to Traffic Police, 13 Sep 1963.

¹⁸⁴ Singapore, *Report of the Committee to Review the Licensing of Taxis and Taxi Drivers* (Singapore: Government Printer, 1966), pp. 2-3.

¹⁸⁵ Singapore, *Report of the Committee to Review the Licensing of Taxis and Taxi Drivers*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁸⁶ Author’s interview with Goh Soon Leng, 1 Aug 2007.

¹⁸⁷ Author’s interviews with Png Pong Tee, 10 Jan 2008; and with Yap Kuai Yong, 16 Jun 2007.

¹⁸⁸ Author’s interviews with Elizabeth Soh, 8 Feb 2007; with Angie Ng, 8 Feb 2007; and with Yap Kuai Yong, 16 Jun 2007; OHC, interview with Qian Hua, 11 Aug 2005.

foot of the housing block. Others simply sold *char bee hoon* outside their flats.¹⁸⁹ In 1969, the police raided a 3-room flat in Beo Crescent and arrested a Chinese labourer's wife for organising *chap ji ki* activities in the house. The family was subsequently served with a notice to quit.¹⁹⁰ *Chap ji ki* operations were also clandestinely carried out at the back of the stalls at the Block 50 shopping centre.¹⁹¹ The *hwei*, the informal system of rotating credit popular in the pre-HDB days, remained in popular demand among low-income families and was based in flats and shops.¹⁹² A family residing in Block 22, who had illegally sublet their vacant 1-room flat in the vicinity to a hawker, had to constantly avoid detection by the HDB's Housing Inspectors.¹⁹³ Another family living in a 2-room flat, having lost its male breadwinner, also illicitly sublet a room to a tenant or as a gambling den.¹⁹⁴

Using the residential premises for work and income was a risky venture which could result in one's eviction from public housing. This could transform families only recently resettled in HDB housing into the 'ghosts' of the modern state as people without a registered home address. Such an example was a female fire victim who moved into a large 4-room unit at Ganges Avenue in late 1961. She was found guilty of using the flat as a gambling den and evicted in 1966; by 1971, her family had still not updated their address with the National Registration Office.¹⁹⁵ Subletting one's residence, a common practice in wooden house and shophouse dwellings, also carried the threat of eviction. A family allocated a 1-room emergency flat at Tiong Bahru Road who sublet the accommodation were evicted by the HDB and summarily abandoned their flat. The Board, trying to collect rent arrears from the family, were unable to trace them through the National Registration Office.¹⁹⁶

¹⁸⁹ Author's interviews with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006; and with Yap Kuai Yong, 16 Jun 2007; OHC, interview with Qian Hua, 11 Aug 2005.

¹⁹⁰ HB 339/51 Vol. II, Memo from Acting Estates Officer, HDB, to Estates Manager, HDB, 28 May 1969.

¹⁹¹ Author's interviews with Eva Hamsha, 2 May 2007; and with Yap Kuai Yong, 22 Jun 2007.

¹⁹² Author's interviews with Elizabeth Soh, 8 Feb 2007; and with Lum Siang Onn, 4 Aug 2007; OHC, interview with Qian Hua, 11 Aug 2005.

¹⁹³ Author's interview with Chong Meng Kiat, 28 Oct 2007.

¹⁹⁴ Author's interview with Lee Wee Kong, 3 Jul 2007.

¹⁹⁵ HB 461/53 Vol. V, Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 7 Jul 1971.

¹⁹⁶ HB 461/53 Vol. VI, Memo from Estates Officer, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 9 Nov 1973.

The flats of Bukit Ho Swee were also economically linked to the pig farming industry. Families commonly placed leftover food in a bucket outside their flat, which was collected daily for use as pig feed. In return, before the Lunar New Year, the swill collectors would give the families eggs or chickens.¹⁹⁷ Beh Swee Kim, the wife of Tan Tiam Ho, whose family had been fairly well-to-do before the 1961 fire, had to work as a swill collector for three hours a day to help make ends meet, stopping only when their children were old enough to work.¹⁹⁸ When Tan Beng Huat, whose father had passed away, was in Primary Six, he had to help his mother collect pig swill from the flats. It was a difficult experience for him, as he felt ‘a bit shy *lah*, sometimes shameful. They called the job “*toh poon*”. It was very shameful, the lowest class of job, like pouring shit’.¹⁹⁹

The Gangs and the Socially Detached Youth

The social underside of Bukit Ho Swee were its secret societies and socially-detached youth. The former’s continued presence and influence in the estate put into perspective a somewhat different official claim that the building of HDB housing on the fire site had brought to an end the days of crime and gangsterism in the area. Administratively, it was easier for the police to find secret society members in a regulated housing estate than in a kampong but this did not fully resolve a basic societal problem which was essentially social and economic in nature. In fact, because the new housing estate had broken down the kampong’s secret society turfs, there were initially frequent gang clashes between members of different groups residing in the same housing blocks as new territories were being demarcated and established.²⁰⁰ As a resident in the estate recalled, ‘There were fights almost every week. There were fewer fights before the fire’.²⁰¹ The two most powerful gangs in Bukit Ho Swee were Sio Leng Hor (‘Small Dragon and Tiger’) and ‘369’, splinter groups of the secret societies of the late colonial period.²⁰² They continued to collect

¹⁹⁷ Author’s interview with James Seah, 21 Oct 2006.

¹⁹⁸ Author’s interviews with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007; and with Beh Swee Kim, 22 Jan 2007.

¹⁹⁹ Author’s interview with Tan Beng Huat, 30 Apr 2007.

²⁰⁰ Author’s interview with Han Tan Juan, 3 Feb 2007. Han witnessed frequent gang fights in Kallang Estate where some Bukit Ho Swee fire victims were temporarily rehoused.

²⁰¹ Author’s interview with Tan Kok Kiem, 8 Feb 2007.

²⁰² Author’s interviews with Gerard Ee, 13 Nov 2006; and with Seah Chee Heng, 6 Aug 2007.

kua tau lui from hawkers and businesses in the estate, including the swill collectors. One coffeeshop owner had to pay \$20-30 each time the gangsters visited.²⁰³ However, it appears that in the 1960s as in the kampong period, secret societies usually carried out criminal activities in HDB estates other than the one they lived in, and that estates with the most powerful secret societies were actually least likely to be disturbed by other gangsters.²⁰⁴

The secret societies continued to recruit from the socially disaffected youths of the estate, who, like their fathers before them, lived at the edge of the law. As long-time social worker Gerard Ee observed, ‘You can take the guy out of the gang but you cannot take the gang out of the guy’, concluding that Bukit Ho Swee’s youths were much more difficult to handle than those in other housing estates.²⁰⁵ A study of gang members in Singapore in the late 1970s found that most of them were poorly-educated, had been employed in low-paying jobs as labourers and production and transport workers, and came from large families of five or more persons, whose parents were also working in low-paying jobs. These youths were also more timid and shy than male youths in general, and consequently joined secret societies for social association and protection. The crimes they committed were, in order of incidence, drug abuse, rioting, homicide, and armed robbery.²⁰⁶ In Bukit Ho Swee, such youths commonly played truant from school or dropped out prematurely, committed acts of vandalism in public spaces and engaged in petty thefts of bicycles and motor vehicles.²⁰⁷ They desired to leave the confined spaces of their emergency flats,²⁰⁸ hanging around at the staircases and void decks of the housing blocks.²⁰⁹ They could be found catching rats from the drains and burning them for fun in the daytime and chatting and drinking in small groups throughout the night.²¹⁰ As a former detached youth explained, their socially aggressive behaviour was an explicit

²⁰³ Author’s interview with Ah Tin, 6 Aug 2007.

²⁰⁴ Seow Peck Leng, *Report on New Life in New Homes* (Singapore: Persatuan Wanita Singapura, 1965), p. 63.

²⁰⁵ Author’s interview with Gerard Ee, 13 Nov 2006.

²⁰⁶ F. Y. Long et al., *Report of a Psycho-social Study of Secret Society Gangsters in Singapore for the Ministry of Home Affairs* (Singapore: Ministry of Home Affairs, 1981), pp. 20, 23, 28, 32, 33, 39, 41.

²⁰⁷ Chong Moon Moi & Chai Loy, *The Social Consequences of Imprisonment: A Case Study of an Ex-prisoner*, unpublished academic exercise, Faculty of Law, University of Singapore, 1973, pp. 10-11.

²⁰⁸ Author’s interview with Anne Lim Siew Kim, 11 Apr 2007.

²⁰⁹ Lai, *Detached Youth Work*, unpaginated.

²¹⁰ Author’s interviews with Tan Beng Huat, 30 Apr 2007; with Lee Beng Huat, 3 May 2007, and with Leela Kwek, 2 May 2007.

challenge directed against authority: in the community centres, for instance, ‘when other people were playing basketball, we played soccer, and when they played soccer, we played basketball. We did this deliberately’.²¹¹

The youth problem was manifest in a series of incidents in Bukit Ho Swee which occurred sporadically from the 1960s to the 1980s. In November 1965, a planned fight occurred involving ‘outsiders’ and male students from Bukit Ho Swee East, Bukit Ho Swee West and Havelock Primary School at the front gate of the East school.²¹² Five days before the fight, the East school had discovered a stick and aerated water bottles hidden beside dustbins in the school compound and had alerted the police. Detectives questioned five pupils of the school and found them armed with a dagger, a screwdriver and a bread knife.²¹³ To the management, the schools of Bukit Ho Swee were located in a place fraught with social danger.²¹⁴ The principal of Bukit Ho Swee East had, before the fight, informed the Ministry of Education that the school was ‘situated in a very bad area’, citing instances of burglary at night in the school bookshop and canteen. Outsiders, the principal claimed, could easily gain access to the school by climbing up the big drains under the school fence.²¹⁵ In 1970, Bukit Ho Swee West likewise experienced acts of vandalism in the early morning and at night on its property,²¹⁶ including vulgar language in Chinese scrawled on walls aimed at the school and at a PAP minister.²¹⁷ In 1973, ten Primary Six pupils of Bukit Ho Swee West were assaulted by three Hokkien-speaking youths armed with long wooden poles at nearby Tiong Bahru Park, for apparently no reason.²¹⁸ According to a former teacher of Bukit Ho Swee

²¹¹ Author’s interview with Yeo Seok Thai, 5 May 2007.

²¹² ME 2785/62, Memo from Principal, Bukit Ho Swee East School, to MOE, 24 Nov 1965.

²¹³ ME 2785/62, Memo from Principal, Bukit Ho Swee East School, to Group Inspector, MOE, 19 Nov 1965.

²¹⁴ Publicly, the schools, like the estate itself, were lauded as successful institutions which emerged from the fiery disaster of May 1961. See Bukit Ho Swee East School, *BHSE: Bukit Ho Swee East School: Our First 20 Years* (Singapore: Bukit Ho Swee East School, 1983).

²¹⁵ ME 2785/62, Memo from Principal, Bukit Ho Swee East School, to Director of Education, MOE, 27 Feb 1963.

²¹⁶ ME 2787/62, Memo from Principal, Bukit Ho Swee West School, to Estates Officer, Bukit Ho Swee Area Office, HDB, 1 Sep 1970.

²¹⁷ ME 2787/62, Memo from Principal, Bukit Ho Swee West School, to Orchard Road Police Station, 31 Aug 1970.

²¹⁸ ME 2787/62, Memo from Principal, Bukit Ho Swee West School, to Orchard Road Police Station, 24 Oct 1973.

Vocational School, there were also frequent fights involving the school's students outside the school gate.²¹⁹

Seah Chee Heng, whose parents had moved into the estate after the 1961 fire, was born in 1962 in Bukit Ho Swee. His life centered around social and economic deprivations typical among the detached youth; he did not finish his primary education and became a construction painter when he was 15 years old. Because of the construction boom, the occupation of building painter was a niche for lowly-educated and unskilled youths like him, paying \$50-60 a day, which he considered good wages. As a youth, Seah was 'curious' and sought 'thrills', and consequently ran afoul of the law, committing robbery, taking drugs and stealing cars. Heroin, Seah recalled, was easy to obtain in the 1970s, for 'your friends could help you buy and you could help them buy', and there were several other young people in his housing block taking the drug. He joined the Sio Leng Hor because it was 'cool', and because the members could help one another when they were bullied; it was not, he insisted, to harass others. The gang collected protection money, controlled syndicates of *ah long* and frequently participated in petty fights over women and 'staring' incidents. But for all their bravado, Seah and his gang were afraid of the *ang chia* ('red car', referring to the riot truck) which would regularly patrol the estate:

This was a large vehicle like a fire engine. We were not afraid of police cars but we were afraid of the *ang chia*. They were very shady. If they saw that we had tattoos, they would catch us, put a bag over our head and beat us up in the truck. So whenever we saw a red truck, we would just flee. After that, they would just release us, they would beat us just for fun. I remember once when I was coming home from school, I saw a red truck, and I just ran. But they never caught me.²²⁰

The failure of socially detached youths in Bukit Ho Swee to acquire the education and skills which would enable them to break free of the vicious cycle of poverty was rooted in their ambivalent, conflicted roles in the family and in the

²¹⁹ Author's interview with Granville Danker, 8 May 2007.

²²⁰ Author's interview with Seah Chee Heng, 6 Aug 2007.

school. The pupils of Bukit Ho Swee were being pulled in different directions, on the one hand by school staff who wanted to mould them into model citizens and on the other by their parents and peers whose social, economic and cultural values belonged more to the kampong and to 'Old Singapore'. As a social worker in the estate wrote in the early 1980s, the poorer and less educated parents, in raising their children, were torn between 'intermingled hope and despair, joy and sorrow [and] love and indifference'.²²¹ Many low-income parents simply subscribed to the traditional view that 'so long as my children are better educated than me, it's okay already'.²²² Disagreements between these parents and the school management over their charges' education reflected this severe tension. In 1973, a parent of a Primary Six student in Bukit Ho Swee West, submitted a complaint to the Ministry of Education, protesting that his son had been 'forced' to repeat 'without any notice or reason given'. When he approached the principal for an explanation, the father claimed, he was given a 'very rude reply of "take it or leave it", due to the fact that he was 'illiterate and retarded in speech'.²²³ Conversely, the pressure of blue-collar work was frequently too exacting for parents to adequately supervise their children; as one father said in frustration about a son who was habitually in trouble with the law, '[E]very day and night, I work until die, drive lorry, feed all of you, still no use....That good for nothing, all he does is find trouble'. These parents considered the problem of their delinquent children as *bo bian* ('hopeless').²²⁴ Education was consequently not high on many low-income parents' minds. In fact, while the estate's parents had been concerned with matters of employment and housing, they were less interested in the building of schools in the locality.²²⁵ Even in the 1990s, there were still cases of parents in Bukit Ho Swee who, because of pressing financial concerns, had not registered their children for primary education.²²⁶

For many children from low-income, Chinese-speaking families, school was a difficult initial experience which they did not always succeed in overcoming. Qian

²²¹ Anne Lim Siew Kim, *Face to Face: The Street Children of Bukit Ho Swee* (Singapore: Landmark Books, 1991), Preface, p. 111.

²²² Author's interview with James Seah, 21 Oct 2006.

²²³ ME 2787/62, Letter from parent to Minister of State, MOE, 25 Jan 1973. The letter was written in English on behalf of the parent.

²²⁴ Lim, *Face to Face: The Street Children of Bukit Ho Swee*, Preface, pp. 76, 81, 96.

²²⁵ OHC, interview with Tang Kan Hoy, 27 Apr 2005.

²²⁶ ST, 13 Nov 1993; and 24 Nov 2002.

Hua, born in 1957 and living in a 1-room emergency flat at Boon Tiong Road in the 1960s, studied at Bukit Ho Swee West. Her father had refused to enroll her in an English school because, he felt, she would become ‘more Baba’ (‘Westernised’). When Qian Hua attended her first lessons, she did not even know Mandarin because her family only used Hokkien at home. She could not write her own name in Mandarin or respond when the teacher called her name, which was true for many of her classmates.²²⁷ Yeo Seok Thai (born 1967) and his family of 14 lived briefly in a 1-room flat in Bukit Ho Swee before shifting to a 3-room unit in the same estate. He dropped out of Bukit Ho Swee East prematurely at the age of 13 after performing poorly and arguing with his teachers. As Yeo explained, the common thinking of low-income, poorly-educated Chinese parents towards their children was, ‘As long as you are alive, you are lucky already’.²²⁸

The economic structure of the low-income family also quickly drew children and youths into the household economy. Girls in particular were likely to be tied down at home to carry out chores or take care of their younger siblings.²²⁹ When Lee Sor Huay intimated that she was afraid to go to school, her parents did not press her but allowed her to spend her teenage years at home preparing noodles for their hawker business.²³⁰ Children like Soh Guat Soon, the son of the widow Quah Geok Hong,²³¹ also sold newspapers and snacks like curry puffs, *chee cheong fun*, *soon kway*, *chai tow kway*, and *otah* along the corridors of the flats, or stayed home to help their parents with handicraft work, such as pasting stickers for the *tikam tikam* game.²³² Whilst still in school, Yeo Seok Thai had begun selling curry puffs in the housing blocks, making a profit of three cents a piece.²³³ These street-wise kids engaged in forms of informal work consequently did not have a genuine childhood but were forced to grow up quickly.²³⁴ Their lack of a cogent individual identity attracted them to secret societies, which readily provided one. Straddling at once different roles as children and young adults, many youths, as an unemployed

²²⁷ OHC, interview with Qian Hua, 11 Aug 2005.

²²⁸ Author’s interviews with Yeo Seok Thai, 3 May 2007 and 5 May 2007.

²²⁹ Lim, *Face to Face: The Street Children of Bukit Ho Swee*, p. 37; author’s interview with Anne Lim Siew Kim, 11 Apr 2007.

²³⁰ Author’s interview with Lee Sor Huay, 14 Sep 2007.

²³¹ Author’s interview with Soh Guat Soon, 27 Jul 2007.

²³² Author’s interviews with Leela Kwek, 2 May 2007; and Anne Lim Siew Kim, 11 Apr 2007.

²³³ Author’s interview with Yeo Seok Thai, 5 May 2007.

²³⁴ Author’s interview with Anne Lim Siew Kim, 11 Apr 2007.

adolescent related in 1970, consequently felt strong, helpless anger towards their parents:

My father is unemployed. He cannot work as he is sick. He is hopeless. I ran away because I was fed up with him as he punished me unreasonably. Because of him, I left school to work to help the family out. Even my mother has to work at the godown. My eldest brother is another bully like my father. My second eldest brother is in National Service.²³⁵

A social work study in 1970 of detached youths living in the 1-room emergency flats of Jalan Bukit Ho Swee highlighted the factors which condemned them to the social and economic margins of modern Singapore society. The youths were Chinese-educated and worked in daily-rated, low-paying jobs as labourers, construction workers, painters, hawkers, trishaw-riders, and unskilled factory workers. They inherited their parents' long-standing distrust of authority and disliked what they viewed as constant 'harassment' by police in the estate. They also possessed an acute lack of self-belief due to their limited education. However, when warmly engaged by the authorities, the youths showed 'a radical change of their concept of self' and successfully took on the role of 'a donor in their community'. They had been banned previously from Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre for unruly behaviour, but when allowed to return in the course of the study, they organised a basketball team and showed commendable restraint in their games. They subsequently met the Member of Parliament, Seah Mui Kok, discussing with him the community's problems and taking him on a tour of the emergency housing block.²³⁶ As the project's supervisor surmised, 'There's a middle class person inside everyone [of the youths], waiting to get out'.²³⁷

Between the 1970s and 1990s, the work of the Bukit Ho Swee Community Service Project, based at Nazareth Centre at Block 44, which the locals simply called 'NC', provides another telling insight into the social problems of detached

²³⁵ Lai, *Detached Youth Work*, unpaginated.

²³⁶ Lai, *Detached Youth Work*, unpaginated.

²³⁷ Author's interview with Ann Wee, 1 Nov 2006.

youth.²³⁸ Although there was apprehension among some parents and youths that NC was *hong kau* ('Christian'),²³⁹ former youths involved in its activities were unanimous in denying any attempts to convert them to Catholicism.²⁴⁰ Following Sister Sabine Fernandez's abortive attempt to organise the 1-room dwellers, the Community Service Project was revived in 1977 as a social service project for children and youths, involving them in sports and games, tuition and literacy classes and field-trips. Such a project was deemed acceptable by the authorities. NC became a place where both listless youths and secret society members gravitated towards one way or another. The *pai kia* viewed NC's premises at Blocks 26 and 44 as sanctuaries from the police or hid their parangs nearby in preparation for secret society clashes.²⁴¹ NC's appeal was that its activities targeted specifically what one former detached youth called the estate's '*di siao siao*' ('mischievous') kids.²⁴² One of the volunteers was a lawyer who represented youths such as Seah Heng Chee when they got into trouble with the law.²⁴³

Former NC volunteer Anne Lim wrote in 1991 of the 'street children' of Bukit Ho Swee as belonging to the category of 'failed' and 'misunderstood' people who were part of the 'old Chinese' society before the 1961 fire and who lived 'at the fringe of society'. At NC, there were, she found, two different groups of youngsters – one inclined towards learning in the tuition and literacy classes, and another seeking to disrupt them, by singing loudly outside the classroom, throwing 'water bombs' at the staff, or hurling car tyres against the walls. The youths in the second category were, according to Lim, 'almost always inviting conflict', not to inflict

²³⁸ The Community Service Project was first established in August 1969 in Bukit Ho Swee Estate in the aftermath of the 1968 blaze to help deal with problems of poverty, unemployment and overcrowded living conditions. Initially involving Christian and Buddhist charitable groups, the Project came under the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary in 1976, who had maintained a clinic in the estate since 1966. The Project's original premises at Block 44, Beo Crescent, was called Nazareth Centre and was relocated to Block 26, Jalan Klinik in 1984. In 1987, the Project was registered as an independent society and renamed Bukit Ho Swee Social Service Centre. In 2001, the management renamed the organisation Beyond Social Services, signalling an expansion of its outreach programme beyond Bukit Ho Swee. Beyond Social Services, 'Our History', <http://www.beyond.org.sg/StaticBeyond/AboutUs/About-Hist.asp>, accessed 15 Mar 2008; Bukit Ho Swee Social Service Centre, *Annual Report 1999*, p. 4.

²³⁹ Lai, Detached Youth Work, unpaginated.

²⁴⁰ Author's interviews with Ah Tin, 6 Aug 2007; with Leow Kee Seng, 3 May 2007; with Yeo Seok Thai, 5 May 2007; and with Lee Beng Huat, 3 May 2007.

²⁴¹ Author's interview with Gerard Ee, 13 Nov 2006.

²⁴² Author's interview with Ah Tin, 6 Aug 2007.

²⁴³ Author's interviews with Mary Chua, 23 May 2007; with Anne Lim Siew Kim, 11 Apr 2007; and with Leela Kwek, 2 May 2007.



Plate 9.15: The children of 'NC' at Block 44, Beo Crescent, c. 1980 (Courtesy of Anne Lim).



Plate 9.16: In the foreground, walking away from 'NC', are the 'street children' of Bukit Ho Swee Estate, c. 1980 (Courtesy of Anne Lim).

genuine harm but to obtain the attention of those in the other 'world'. These youths, like their parents, were resigned to their peripheral social and economic status in society; of their studies, they said, 'Some [students] sure must fail. Like us *lah*. We are the *bodoh* ['stupid'] one'. As Lim surmised in a poem on the 'street children', 'you attack to defend, you shout your anger and cry your frustration', actions which

belied ‘the plea behind the cry, the frustration behind the anger’.²⁴⁴ For Yeo Seok Thai, who learnt his English at NC and was one of the kids who infuriated Lim and other NC staff, such loud and superficially aggressive acts were a way of attempting to make contact with people who offered them respect and hope:

The first thing was that we wanted to make fun of them. They couldn’t speak a word of Hokkien so we made fun of them until they were furious. In the end, we became friends. You needed to have conflict before you became friends. I felt very close to NC. You looked at them and you felt that you could get close to them. If you saw a policeman there, you would feel, *kua liao du lan* [‘If I see them, I get very angry’]. Because the people at NC were not looking for trouble with us, we felt very close with them. And you were only a child and yet an adult was listening to you, so you felt very proud.²⁴⁵

Tan Beng Huat was also an active volunteer at NC. He studied in the English-medium Tiong Bahru Secondary School, where his involvement in the Scout movement inspired him to help his own community and to cultivate a sense of identity among the local youth. Tan began volunteering with the Bukit Ho Swee Children Club in 1976 and later started a Detached Youth Club, where he organised trips and ‘joy-rides’ which were very popular for the youngsters. Taking up the job of a daily-rated construction worker, an occupation held by many of the youth, he soon got to know them well. They, Tan explained, worked and lived for the moment, with little thought of saving their earnings or settling down in a family. They were poorly educated, who ‘when they open their mouth, only vulgarity, and when they close their mouth, vulgarity’. The youths also frequently abused drugs such as heroin, upjohn, MX, and tranquilisers, or sniffed thinner, and were repeatedly undergoing drug rehabilitation. Tan’s volunteer work was fraught with great difficulty, as the youth continued to be pulled between rehabilitative and criminal

²⁴⁴ Lim, *Face to Face: The Street Children of Bukit Ho Swee*, Preface, pp. 6-7, 38, 70, 111-12; author’s interview with Anne Lim Siew Kim, 11 Apr 2007.

²⁴⁵ Author’s interview with Yeo Seok Thai, 5 May 2007.

influences. He started boxing and carpentry classes and a liondance troupe for the youths but all of them were eventually penetrated by secret society elements.²⁴⁶

By the late 1990s, the character of the youth problem in Bukit Ho Swee had changed in form but remained deeply social and economic in nature. It was still firmly rooted in the structure of the low-income family and its uncertain place in the community and within the wider framework of a progressive, regulated nation-state. Bukit Ho Swee Estate's population had consistently been overwhelmingly Chinese with a slight shift occurring only at the turn of the century. In 1970, the Chinese comprised 97% of the estate's population,²⁴⁷ and in 2000, the figure was still 90%.²⁴⁸ There were always fewer Malays than Indians living in the estate, even after ethnic quotas were introduced in flats in 1980 to achieve a proportionate balance of the ethnic groups in public housing. However, the entry of more ethnic minority families into the estate in the 1990s, many of whom were downsizing to smaller flats due to financial difficulty, particularly during the post-1997 Asian Financial Crisis economic downturn, brought about a new dimension to the social and economic problems still extant in Bukit Ho Swee.²⁴⁹ There was, as Beyond Social Services observed, a self-perpetuating 'culture of delinquency', with not only the youths but their families also 'deeply entrenched in delinquency (opiate delinquency in particular)'. Malay youths formed a disproportionately large percentage of Beyond's clientele, of whom, significantly, three-quarters were living in the rental flats. The socially detached youths continued to lack parental supervision and to roam the streets, skip classes and abuse drugs. They still stole bicycles, broke into hawker stalls at night,²⁵⁰ and were recruited from schools, entertainment centres and shopping malls into the secret societies.²⁵¹ Some of the liondance troupes in Bukit Ho Swee, comprised largely of Malay youths, were fronts for secret societies. The troupes provided both income and identity for the youth, who frequently skipped lessons to take part in performances.²⁵²

²⁴⁶ Author's interview with Tan Beng Huat, 30 Apr 2007.

²⁴⁷ Arumainathan, *Census of Population, 1970: Interim Release*, p. 2.

²⁴⁸ Leow, *Census of Population 2000*, p. 39.

²⁴⁹ BHSSSC, *Annual Report 1998*, p. 52; and *Annual Report 1999*, p. 23.

²⁵⁰ BHSSSC, *Annual Report 1999*, p. 33.

²⁵¹ BHSSSC, *Annual Report 1997*, pp. 15-54.

²⁵² Author's interview with Leela Kwek, 2 May 2007.

The relative balance of the forces of change and continuity in Bukit Ho Swee Estate calls for a longer-term assessment of the actual impact of the 1961 inferno on the social development of Singapore. To some extent, the social and economic problems which persisted in the estate after the fire can rightfully be regarded as ‘birth pangs’ of the nation-state and of an ambitious project in mass housing. The emergency flats, unlicensed hawkers, pirate taxis, and unauthorised uses of flats were short-term problems which were forcefully resolved as the official net drew tighter on the previously semi-autonomous ways of life in the estate. For example, since the late 1960s, formerly unlicensed hawkers such as Tay Ah Chuan, Tan Nam Sia and Tay Bok Chiu have become (and still remain) officially regularised vendors at the Beo Crescent market, indicating how a previously marginal occupational group has been successfully integrated into the economic and social fabric of the high modernist state.

However, Bukit Ho Swee’s persistent ‘underside’, exemplified by the continued economic and educational marginalisation of families, particularly those in the 1-room flats, and the social detachment of youths from mainstream society and their frequent involvement in secret society activity, suggests that the central problem was not the lack of proper administration and social welfare but, rather, the social costs and repercussions of the relentless pursuit of progress itself. From this perspective, the Bukit Ho Swee fire was more successful in enabling the PAP government to rehouse former kampong dwellers in regulated public housing and socialising them to a disciplined way of life in tandem with the emergence of a high modernist state, than in redistributing the social and economic fruits of that economic development to the poorest group in society. A clear sign of the triumph of this political hegemony is that, even today, the economically marginalised continue to acknowledge the government’s role in providing clean, modern shelter for them while blaming their *tong kor* on predestination, or themselves.



Plate 9.17: Author on a swing at Taman Ho Swee, as bare-chested boys play in the field behind, c. 1970s. In the background is Block 29, Havelock Road (Photograph by Loh Tian Ho).



Plate 9.18: Author at a playground just outside Block 28, Jalan Membina, the site of the emergency housing built after the 1959 Kampong Tiong Bahru Fire, c. 1970s. The block had the 'pointed' rooftop characteristic of HDB emergency housing (Photograph by Loh Tian Ho).

As a footnote to this history of Bukit Ho Swee Estate, I shall briefly outline my family's story here. My parents married in 1969 and lived with *Ah Kong* and *Tua Pui Ma* in their 3-room flat in Block 29, Havelock Road. I was born in 1972 and followed two years later by my sister. In 1975, our family of four moved out of *chap lak lau* ('16 storeys', the Hokkien name for Block 29) into a 1-room rental flat in Block 28, Jalan Membina, the site of the emergency housing built after the 1959 Kampong Tiong Bahru fire. So began my experience of living in 1-room housing which preoccupied my youthful mind. Two years later, we shifted to an improved 1-room flat, which the Chinese called '*jit bang bua tia*' ('one bedroom and half a living room') in Block 14 in the same area, and then on National Day, 1980, into another, albeit lower-rent, improved 1-room flat in Block 79, Indus Road. For reasons then unclear to me, I was acutely embarrassed by the housing, which was, to me, a tangible sign of our 'poverty'. I kept the fact from my classmates and repeatedly urged my parents to obtain a larger home. But my father was a daily-rated *goo li* ('labourer') and my mother a housewife, although we sometimes did handicraft work at home for additional income. But despite the humble accommodation, where my parents slept on blankets laid over the linoleum in the living room and my sister and I on a double-deck bed in a partitioned corner, I spent many happy days at Havelock Primary School. Although I still vividly recall the burning embarrassment on my face when a classmate visited my home and said, 'Your house so small *ah*?' The school, as opposed to the flat, was the pivotal centre of my life. I knew blissfully nothing of how Block 79 was, as Yeo Seok Thai later told me, *hock chap* ('complicated'), where low-income families struggled with debt and their children ran afoul of the law.²⁵³ Instead, I graduated well from Havelock and enrolled in River Valley High School at Kim Seng Road, part of the relief centre for the victims of the 1961 inferno. It was in the midst of my secondary education, on 4 June 1989, the day of the Tiananmen Square Massacre, that my family finally left the locality, having purchased a 3-room flat in Yishun New Town in north Singapore. This, I thought happily, was the true meaning of progress. I never knew about the great kampong fire or thought about returning to Bukit Ho Swee.

²⁵³ Author's interview with Yeo Seok Thai, 3 May 2007.

Chapter 10

Memory, Myth and Identity

There is a traditional Chinese cobbler in his 70s working in the Tanjong Katong area. On the sides of his shoe rack containing the tools of his trade are photographs of historical Singapore, including street scenes in the interwar years and the 1964 communal riots. There is also an image of the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire, showing men hauling cupboards away from the towering inferno, while a throng of onlookers moved forward in the opposite direction. One of the latter was Ng Hoot Seng, the cobbler, who had gone along to see the spectacle. The fire, he told me, was impossible to fight because the wooden houses were too closely built together, and there had been unsubstantiated rumours as to its cause. When I asked why he had the photograph displayed on the rack, Ng said it was to let his customers know about Singapore's history.¹



Plate 10.1: Ng Hoot Seng, 2006. The picture of the Bukit Ho Swee fire is on the lower part of the rack (Photograph by author).

The intertwining of history and personal memory which surfaced in my chance encounter with Ng provides a useful starting point in this chapter for the

¹ Author's interview with Ng Hoot Seng, 18 Oct 2006.

crucial discussion of the three myths of the Bukit Ho Swee fire and their relationship with memory and identity. The focus here is on the inferno's social impact on the identity and collective memory of the fire victims and of Singaporeans more generally. Like the onlookers walking towards the conflagration in 1961, later-day Singaporeans have similarly been drawn towards the event. The chapter traces the People's Action Party government's creation of a powerful myth about the nature of the calamity, in which the hitherto 'inert community' of Kampong Bukit Ho Swee rose triumphantly, like the proverbial phoenix, from the ashes of the fire to be transformed in the modern era; a meta-social narrative generally accepted by the fire victims and the public at large. Nevertheless, co-existing in tension with the myth are memories of traditional kampong life which the fire victims recall with fond nostalgia, and which also mythologises the past as much as the official discourse.² The nostalgia for the kampong, significantly, reflects both an attitude of deep ambivalence towards the rapid societal transformation of Singapore undertaken in the 1960s and a consequent sense of personal loss among elderly Singaporeans of their own role, identity and agency in the high modernist state. Another more covert form of the social memory of the fire shares with the nostalgia an implicit criticism of the present but differs in being discussed only in social contexts removed from official scrutiny. This perception of the past is what I call the unwritten 'counter-myth' of the 1961 inferno – the rumours of government-inspired arson. The rumours that continue to persist are, really, 'hidden transcripts'.³ They are the last signs of an unauthorised, semi-autonomous way of life that was prevalent in the urban kampongs in the 1950s, still confronting and countering the officially-sanctioned PAP myth over the meaning of high modernity in Singapore. Both the nostalgia and the rumours signify the Singaporeans' ongoing complex and ambivalent relationship with the PAP government and the uncertainty of their identity as citizens in the high modernist city-state.

² K. K. Seet, 'Last Days at Wak Selat: The Demise of a Kampong', in Brenda S. A. Yeoh & Lily Kong (eds), *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity in Singapore* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1995), p. 219.

³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

The Making of a Myth

By speaking about the myth surrounding the Bukit Ho Swee fire, I do not mean that it is a historical fabrication. Rather, I refer to the fact that the inferno has not been officially treated as a historical event to date but, rather, has been utilised as a simplistic but powerful metaphor to signify the progress of Singapore under the PAP government.⁴ The myth constitutes a celebratory account of success overcoming adversity, which forms the basic political template for the official narrative of the city-state's history, the Singapore Story. It is, consequently, a highly selective account. Nothing is mentioned about the preceding process of kampong clearance and building of emergency housing on fire sites in the 1950s which assisted the PAP project; nothing is said, too, of the contestation over the nature and terms of the massive social transformation which took place after the fire, including the rumours of government-inspired arson and the many fire victims' dissatisfaction with the Housing and Development Board's rehousing programme.

The Bukit Ho Swee myth first emerged in public consciousness in the 1960s when Singapore was depicted as a showcase state in the developing world for both international and local audiences. The PAP leadership, attempting to attract foreign investors to Singapore's manufacturing sector, used the HDB's work to market the island's image as a modernist state to Western countries, particularly the United States.⁵ By the end of its first 5-Year Plan, the HDB had also begun to view the scale and quality of its flats as a source of national pride. The Board was cautiously promoting its housing programme as providing relevant lessons for developing countries in the late 1960s.⁶ On site tours, visual images of HDB construction sites and written and oral accounts of 'insanitary' and 'dangerous' autonomous housing being suitably replaced by modern flats were consequently offered as best practice

⁴ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paladin Books, 1973), p. 109; Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. xx.

⁵ Nancy Kwak, 'International influences on the creation of a national landscape in Singapore 1945-2000', in Shane Ewen & Pierre-Yves Saunier (eds), *The Other Global City: Transnational Connections and Urban Problems in the Modern Age* (London: Palgrave, forthcoming in 2008). See also Nancy Kwak, *A Citizen's Right to Decent Shelter: Public Housing in New York, London and Singapore post-1945*, unpublished PhD dissertation, Department of History, Columbia University, 2006.

⁶ Speech by E. W. Barker, Minister for National Development, in *2nd Afro-Asian Housing Congress* (Singapore, 1967), p. 4; and speech by Howe Yoon Chong, Chairman of HDB, in *2nd Afro-Asian Housing Congress*, pp. 2-6.

to foreign dignitaries visiting Singapore in the 1960s. Significantly, a number of Asian officials, accompanied by the HDB's Board members and departmental heads, viewed the ongoing construction at the Bukit Ho Swee fire site in 1961-1962.⁷ Conversely, it was also expedient to highlight the 'before and after' story of public housing to the local population and persuade those still living in shophouses and kampongs in the City to move into HDB flats. The PAP government, in short, pragmatically began to utilise the recent history of a social disaster to promote its social and political development programmes in the early 1960s.

The semiotic significance of the photograph in winning the hearts and minds of international and local target audiences should also be stressed here.⁸ Because of its visual impact, as Susan Sontag observed, the photograph was an ideal instrument for transforming social reality.⁹ In Singapore, in particular, the photographs taken by the Royal Air Force both before and after the 1961 fire played an important role in both supporting and promoting the HDB's public housing programme. These aerial photographs were useful both for public exhibitions as well as providing vital topographical information on 'the degree and state of occupation by squatters', which enabled the HDB to effectively plan future clearance programmes.¹⁰ In early 1963, Teh Cheang Wan, the Chief Architect, ordered that various stages of the Board's construction work be photographed: the site before and after clearance, when the earthworks and piling work had begun, when the flats were half-completed, and finally, when they were finished.¹¹ Such photographs became immediately useful later in the year when the government participated in an international conference in Berlin called 'Partners in Progress', with a view to promoting the

⁷ HB 617/55 Vol. II, Memo from Secretary, HDB, to Board Members and Heads of Departments, undated, 17 Dec 1962; Memo from Assistant Secretary, HDB, to PS, MND, 3 Oct 1962; Memo from Secretary, HDB, to Secretary of External Affairs, Prime Minister's Office, 25 Jul, 1961; Memo from Secretary, HDB, to PS, Commerce & Industry, 11 Jul 1961. The visitors included Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia, the Governor of Jakarta, the Indonesian Minister for Trade, and the Minister of Finance of the Madras state government.

⁸ On the usefulness of historical photographs for recovering the everyday life of the inarticulate in colonial Singapore, see James Francis Warren, 'Social History and the Photograph: Glimpses of Chinese and Japanese Labour in Singapore in the Early Twentieth Century', *Pirates, Prostitutes and Pullers: Explorations in the Ethno- and Social History of Southeast Asia* (Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2008).

⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1997).

¹⁰ HB 37/50, Memo from CEO, HDB, to Assistant Secretary for Defence, MHA, 3 Nov 1960.

¹¹ HB 37/50, Memo from Chief Architect, HDB, to Assistant Public Relations Officer, HDB, 25 Mar 1963.

island's tourist industry and highlighting its recent industrial and housing development projects.¹²

Bukit Ho Swee Estate, notwithstanding its emergency housing, was a popular early target of the official photographers. The HDB's 1962 Annual Report contained a photograph (see Plate 10.2) of the 6-storey blocks of 1-room emergency flats built on the 1961 fire site,¹³ highlighting the building of flats on the 'exact spot' where the fire had started less than nine months earlier; this was both an explicit public reference to Lee Kuan Yew's promise to the fire victims and a sign of the government's genuine concern for the interests of the low-income urban population.¹⁴ This and other photographs were also used to woo the support of British officials in Singapore and Britain. In June 1963, the British Trade Commissioner, based in London, upon receiving the Board's Annual Report for 1961 and its pictorial pamphlet, *Homes for the People*, ordered several photographs of its public housing programme, including two prints of the Bukit Ho Swee fire and one showing the ongoing construction on the fire site alongside an 'adjoining attap slum'.¹⁵ In 1970, aerial photographs of Bukit Ho Swee and Tiong Bahru estates provided the HDB vital aerial information on the existence of 'extensive slums around the housing estates'.¹⁶ These images proved useful for the Board's clearance of the remaining unauthorised wooden housing at Covent Garden and Kim Seng Road and in the southern part of Si Kah Teng near the Malayan Railway Line.¹⁷

A number of modernist-inclined publications in the 1960s also reinforced the role of the Bukit Ho Swee fire in the making of modern Singapore. In 1965, a book published by a group of progressive women hailed how the public housing programme had given Singaporeans 'new life in new homes' and described Bukit

¹² HB 37/50, Memo from PS, EDB, to Chairman, HDB, 2 Jul 1963.

¹³ HDB, *Annual Report 1962*, p. 36.

¹⁴ HB 48/50 Vol. II, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 22 Feb 1963.

¹⁵ HB 37/50, Letter from Trade Commissioner for Singapore in the United Kingdom to Secretary, HDB, 7 Jun 1963. The Commissioner eventually did not receive the photographs of the fire as they had been taken by the *Nanyang Siang Pau*. HB 37/50, Letter from Secretary, HDB, to Trade Commissioner for Singapore in the United Kingdom, 19 Jun 1963.

¹⁶ HB 37/50, Memo from CEO, HDB, to PS, MND, 13 Feb 1970.

¹⁷ HDB, *Annual Report 1969*, p. 66.



Plate 10.2: 1-room flats along Jalan Bukit Ho Swee. HDB, *Annual Report 1962*, p. 36.

Ho Swee Estate as ‘a Phoenix rose out of the ashes of the old burnt out hutments’.¹⁸ In the following year, the Board produced *50,000 Up: Homes for the People* to celebrate the accomplishments of its first 5-Year Plan. Here, the Bukit Ho Swee fire was depicted as a great unforeseen challenge which was successfully overcome and told in meticulous detail from the path of the fiery destruction on 25 May to the completion of the HDB flats within nine months and, consequently, the fulfillment of Lee Kuan Yew’s promise. This positivist empirical style, however, belied the use of strong discursive language and contrasting images to illustrate the transformation of ‘one of the city’s unloviest slum areas’ into a modern housing estate. Significantly, the inferno was categorised as a ‘natural disaster’, allowing the government to distance itself from rumours of arson and to attribute the cause of the conflagration to either an overturned cooking stove or a carelessly dropped cigarette, in effect placing the blame for the catastrophe squarely on the wooden house dwellers.¹⁹

¹⁸ Seow Peck Leng, *Report on New Life in New Homes* (Singapore: Persatuan Wanita Singapura, 1965), p. 23.

¹⁹ HDB, *50,000 Up: Homes for the People* (Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1966), pp. 56-60.

In 1967, the HDB published the first official history of Bukit Ho Swee, simply titled *Bukit Ho Swee Estate*. This was the first in a line of publications on HDB housing estates which the Board had planned in 1965.²⁰ The slim 41-page booklet set out to tell the story of ‘a low-cost housing estate which was literally born out of fire’, contrasting descriptions and photographs of choked up drains, rotting timber and attap, and combustible building materials of the kampong, with those of the ‘happy families’ who were ‘looking forward’ after the 1961 fire to living in the well-furnished HDB homes with modern kitchens and social amenities in the estate. The inferno, then, was construed as a ‘blessing in disguise’ for the fire victims:

The story of Bukit Ho Swee is a familiar one of an insanitary, congested and dangerous squatter area, which had an happy ending. The fire disaster was a blessing in disguise for all the occupants there. It is a far too familiar picture of an inert community who would not think of moving from their unpleasant and dangerous surroundings until a disaster makes the decision for them. Many are so used to the unpleasant surroundings that they do not know it possible to enjoy well-planned, congenial environment for happy and healthy upbringing of families.

The fire, the booklet concluded, had pragmatically served ‘as a lesson for all those living in such dangerous and appalling conditions to cooperate with the Government in helping to wipe out such living conditions and prevent a recurrence of such disasters’.²¹ *Bukit Ho Swee Estate* was soon followed in 1969 by a commemorative HDB book celebrating a decade of its work, which remembered the inferno for the way it ‘dramatically underscored’ the determination and success of the Board’s building programme in ‘five action-packed years’.²²

In addition to the photographs and public histories were the radio and television programmes on the 1961 fire made in the 1960s and early 1970s by the

²⁰ HB 290/65, Memo from Assistant Secretary, HDB, to Secretary, HDB, 9 Feb 1966.

²¹ HDB, *Bukit Ho Swee Estate* (Singapore: Housing and Development Board, 1967), pp. 3-5, 24-39. The book stated, erroneously, that there were only two fatalities in the fire.

²² HDB, *First Decade in Public Housing, 1960-69* (Singapore: Housing & Development Board, 1970), pp. 8-9.

Ministry of Culture and the state-owned Radio Corporation of Singapore. Targeting local audiences, these productions typically contained selected interviews which inevitably elicited the fire victims' satisfaction with their new flats and highlighted the historical significance of the conflagration. One advantage of the film images, which became increasingly important with the advent of popular television in Singapore in 1963, was the persuasive power of an aerial view of the newfound modernity, neat organisation and visual majesty of the HDB housing estates silhouetted under the tropical sun, with, occasionally, the traditional shophouses and wooden dwellings of 'Old Singapore' revealed to be standing resolutely in the shadows at the edge of the frame.²³ These moving pictures were framed in the customary official discourse of the absolute necessity of clearance and rehousing, where it was confidently stated that with Bukit Ho Swee Estate now having a 'fire brigade near at hand',²⁴ 'the dangers of such devastating fires will be gone forever'.²⁵

The early 1970s, however, temporarily ended official interest in the Bukit Ho Swee fire for a decade. As the HDB began to build satellite towns in the outlying areas of Singapore island, what it had recently accomplished at the margins of the City became less important to recall. More crucial at this point was the PAP's decision to ignore history and the national past and to concentrate instead on the development of a modern nation-state. The active pursuit of history was viewed as stirring up the 'jealous gods of the past' which would prevent the citizenry from embracing the necessary ideology of progress.²⁶ In education, the central aim was 'to equip today's child with those values and attitudes which will help him as tomorrow's man',²⁷ through the learning of science and technical skills. History became a partly non-examinable subject in primary schools in 1968, fully so in 1972

²³ MC, audio-visual programme titled *Berita Singapura: A New Look At Housing*, broadcast in the 1960s, exact date unknown.

²⁴ MC, audio-visual programme titled *Berita Singapura: A New Look At Housing*, broadcast in the 1960s, exact date unknown. The Alexandra fire station, however, was already built in 1954.

²⁵ MC, audio-visual programme titled *The People's Singapore: Fire Relief*, broadcast in the 1960s, exact date unknown. Also RCS, audio programme titled *This, Our Singapore (No. 5): Housing*, broadcast on 7 Jan 1963; RCS, audio programme titled *This, Our Singapore: Housing*, broadcast on 14 May 1963; RCS, audio programme titled *This, Our Singapore: Social Welfare*, broadcast on 3 Dec 1962; and RCS, audio programme titled *Then and Now (No. 1): A Look At Housing*, broadcast on 16 Sep 1972.

²⁶ Devan Nair, in *Not by Wages Alone* (Singapore: National Trades Union Congress, 1982), pp. 313-19.

²⁷ Nair, *Not by Wages Alone*, p. 277.

and three years later was combined with Civics and Geography into a non-examinable subject.²⁸

This pragmatic dismissal of the place of history in society finally ended in the late 1970s. The authorities began to publicly worry about a generation of young Singaporeans born after independence, who had not, it was argued, experienced the trials and tribulations of nation-building and would consequently take the nation's stability and prosperity for granted. When the Workers' Party candidate, J. B. Jeyaretnam, won the Anson by-election in 1981, breaking the PAP's complete hold over Parliament since 1968, the Old Guard's worst fears about this generation's 'complacency' seemed to have been vindicated, by their apparent willingness to embrace the Western notion of a parliamentary opposition. The government's response, in part, was to 'return to history', which would now provide the raw material for framing 'lessons' to discipline young Singaporeans' 'individualistic' tendencies. One of the most important lessons, as Lee Kuan Yew argued after the Anson result, was that the PAP between 1965 and 1981 presided over 'Singapore's best years....our years of political stability, blessed by no fractious, querulous, carping opposition in Parliament', and that a parliamentary opposition made no real difference to good government.²⁹ Singapore's history, seen from the Old Guard's vantage point, became the source for a new official 'discourse of crisis' and an important instrument of the PAP's political legitimisation. Young Singaporeans seeking to depart from the PAP way were warned of unravelling the 'vulnerable' nation-state's stability and prosperity.³⁰

It was in this new political context in the early 1980s that the Bukit Ho Swee fire now reappeared as a foundational event in the making of the modern Singapore state. The inferno was hailed in 1979 and 1980 in the HDB bulletin *Our Home* as a turning point for an underprivileged, socially deviant population of 'hawkers, labourers, secret societies and the unemployed', hitherto living in 'squalid conditions'. By contrast, the myriad new flats built after the fire both fulfilled Lee

²⁸ Albert Lau, 'The National Past and the Writing of the History of Singapore', in Ban Kah Choon, Anne Pakir & Tong Chee Kiong (eds), *Imagining Singapore* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1992), pp. 50-51.

²⁹ *ST*, 15 Dec 1981.

³⁰ Loh Kah Seng, 'Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore', *Crossroads*, 12 (2), 1998, pp. 1-21.

Kuan Yew's promise to the fire victims and stood as 'a concrete and living monument to the strength and viability of the Government and the Housing & Development Board to meet all eventualities in attending to the needs of all the people at all times and under all circumstances'.³¹ These exhortations were of course not new but what was different was how Bukit Ho Swee Estate was now being depicted as a friendly, harmonious neighbourhood.³² This community-based ethos, clearly, was targeted at the increasingly 'individualistic' young Singaporean. Other locally based commemorative publications at this time included the souvenir magazine of Bukit Ho Swee East School, which traced the institution's origins to the 1961 calamity,³³ and that of Kim Seng constituency, which in celebrating a quarter of a century of nation-building in 1984, highlighted Bukit Ho Swee's transformation from a backward kampong to 'a community with warm and friendly neighbourliness'.³⁴ In addition, the established assertion that the Bukit Ho Swee inferno 'dramatically underscored' the government's determination to build affordable shelter for the low-income groups reappeared in an official publication reflecting on Singapore's past, present and future in 1982,³⁵ and in John Drysdale's 1984 triumphal history of modern Singapore, aptly titled *Struggle for Success* and commissioned by the *Straits Times*.³⁶

But the most important official publication on Bukit Ho Swee in this period was the 1983 public history book *The Emergence of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation to Progress*. Jointly produced by the HDB, the Archives and Oral History Department and the Kim Seng Citizens' Consultative Committee, the publication told a familiar 'before and after' story of Bukit Ho Swee, where urban

³¹ HDB, 'The Bukit Ho Swee Story', *Our Home*, Oct 1979, p. 28.

³² HDB, 'The HDB Comes of Age – the Early Days of Bukit Ho Swee', *Our Home*, Dec 1980, pp. 28, 30.

³³ Bukit Ho Swee East School, *BHSE: Bukit Ho Swee East School: Our First 20 Years* (Singapore: Bukit Ho Swee East School, 1983), pp. 3, 8.

³⁴ Kim Seng Constituency, *Kim Seng Kaleidoscope: A Souvenir Magazine to Celebrate our 25 Years of Nation-building 1959-1984* (Singapore: Kim Seng Constituency 19th National Day Celebration Committee, 1984), p. 1. Other official grassroots publications telling a progressivist story of Bukit Ho Swee in the early 1980s include Bukit Ho Swee Residents' Committees, *3rd Term Inauguration Souvenir Magazine, 1980-1982*, 1982, pp. 10-24; and Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre, *Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre Official Opening Souvenir Magazine, 31st Jul 1982* (Singapore: Bukit Ho Swee Community Centre, 1982), pp. 7, 38-40.

³⁵ Liu Thai Ker, 'A Review of Public Housing in Singapore', in S. Jayakumar (ed.), *Our Heritage and Beyond* (Singapore: National Trades Union Congress, 1982), p. 134.

³⁶ John Drysdale, *Singapore: Struggle for Success* (Singapore: Times Books International, 1984), pp. 257-58.

dwellers living in dilapidated, combustible and insanitary wooden houses (powerfully exemplified by a photograph of pigs grazing among the dwellings) was brought to an end by great fires in 1961 and 1968, which enabled the building of modern public housing on the fire sites. What was new, once again, was a conscious effort to emphasise the social significance of *age* in the making of a national narrative. Yeo Ning Hong, the Member of Parliament for Kim Seng, observed:

The residents of Kim Seng, especially those who have stayed here for the past two decades, are a hardy lot, representative of the true Singaporean. They have persevered through hard times and have now emerged a stronger and fitter community.

With Yeo's statement, the seemingly 'inert community' which had previously resided in the kampong before the fire were now duly elevated to the status of model citizens of the nation. Yeo continued by highlighting the need for Singaporeans to embrace the communitarian ethos and to be wary of 'complacency':

But that does not mean we and our children can be complacent, sit back and relax and enjoy the fruits of our labour. New problems and new challenges await us....We need to keep up the good work, maintain close relationship and rapport with one another, our neighbours, and our friends. We must strive together as a team always – in our workplace, in our neighbourhood, in the SAF [Singapore Armed Forces] and in our nation.³⁷

In conjunction with the launch of the book was a week-long pictorial exhibition held at Kim Seng Community Centre,³⁸ featuring more than 175 metre-high historical photographs, maps and documents mounted on viewing boards. The exhibition's aim, it was stated, was to help 'young Singaporeans to appreciate better the hard times experienced by our forefathers'. In promotional segments shown on

³⁷ Archives & Oral History Department, Kim Seng Citizens' Consultative Committee & Bukit Ho Swee Area Office, HDB, *Emergence of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation to Progress* (Singapore: Singapore News & Publications Limited, 1983), Message from Dr Yeo Ning Hong.

³⁸ The exhibition was reportedly conceived in late 1979 by the executive estate officer of the HDB's Bukit Ho Swee Area Office, a history honours graduate. *ST*, 7 Nov 1983.

national television, the 1961 fire was re-presented through video footage and replete with recollections, now a generation removed, of former fire victims and fire-fighters. The important link between the crisis, the government's determined response and the social community which emerged thereafter was duly emphasised:

Written on the faces of the people of Bukit Ho Swee are the experiences of a hard life, survival of 3 great fires, the tenacity of a migrant people, the courage of a PM who delivered the then seemingly impossible promise – providing homes for the 16,000, and the will and verve of a people who are not willing to be defeated.³⁹

The central event in the official reminiscence of the Bukit Ho Swee fire in 1983 was Yeo Ning Hong's half-hour speech at the opening of the exhibition. He began by recounting how as a boy he had visited Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, thus placing himself in the age set of elderly Singaporeans. The exhibition, he stated, was useful for young people who had not known hardship of any sort. At this point in the middle of his speech, Yeo broke away from the historical past to deliver a ten minute mini-lecture on the duties of the Singapore citizen, who, he warned, must not take the nation's prosperity for granted:

We would be making a very big mistake if we assume that progress is a natural state of affairs....There are thousands and thousands of villages all over the world where the living conditions today are no better than what they were 25 years ago, where the slums stood 25 years ago. So we have been very fortunate that over the last 24 years, we have a combination of factors which brought about the success which we are presently enjoying in Singapore. These kinds of changes are rare. It does not happen everywhere.

Continuing, Yeo explained that Singapore's success was due to two primary factors: a government which was concerned for the people's long-term interests and not afraid to implement unpopular policies, and a citizenry which was 'sufficiently

³⁹ NAS, audio-visual recording titled *A Pictorial Exhibition: The Emergence Of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation To Progress*, broadcast in Nov 1983.

realistic to know that in a country of 620 square km with no natural resources, we cannot get things for free' and 'sufficiently rational to understand the rationale of government policies....that they would be good for the people in the long run, for all the people, not just a small group of people'. Yeo then went on to wear a different parliamentary hat by explaining the government's unpopular policy to limit the number of cars in Singapore.⁴⁰ His speech clearly demonstrated that the target of the government's deliberations on the recent past was no longer 'Old Singapore', as was the case in the 1960s, but rather, 'Young Singapore'.

The culmination of the framing of the official discourses on the Bukit Ho Swee fire in the 1980s was the event's inclusion, as a defining moment in Singapore's recent history, in the 1988 officially-commissioned documentary series, *Diary of a Nation*. Broadcast on national television on 25 May – the day of the blaze – the Bukit Ho Swee episode included oral history reminiscences and pictorial and video images of the inferno. The squalid, criminal and insanitary nature of kampong life was, invariably, triumphantly contrasted with the building of flats on the fire site on a hitherto unparalleled scale. 'Bukit Ho Swee will long be remembered', the programme emphasised, 'as the place where the most devastating fire occurred, and which phoenix-like, a new estate emerged from the smoldering ashes'. The narrative, however, also extended the story of progress to the present, by noting that the emergency housing of Bukit Ho Swee had recently been demolished to 'make way for newer and better ones', a reference to the HDB's programmes of controlled demolition and redevelopment during the decade.⁴¹

The role of the 1961 inferno as part of this discourse of social 'revitalisation' and nation-building becomes even more evident with the publication of the 1996 coffee table book by Sumiko Tan, a *Straits Times* journalist, titled *Kim Seng: A Reflection of Singapore's Success*. Yeo Ning Hong, in introducing the book, urged that '[t]o survive the traumas and upheavals that are part and parcel of life, people need to remember their roots', which would 'provide them with the ballast and strength to meet the challenges of the future'. The book was relevant, Yeo explained,

⁴⁰ NAS, audio-visual recording titled *A Pictorial Exhibition: The Emergence Of Bukit Ho Swee Estate: From Desolation To Progress*, broadcast in Nov 1983.

⁴¹ SBC, audio-visual programme titled *Diary of a Nation: Bukit Ho Swee Fire, 25 May 1961*, broadcast on 25 May 1988.

in recounting ‘how the slums and shacks of Bukit Ho Swee were destroyed by fires’ and in looking forward to ‘the continuing upgrading of the constituency’.⁴² Filled with large glossy photographs of Bukit Ho Swee past and present and interviews with elderly residents, the publication begins with a scene of elderly men chatting in a shady corner of Beo Crescent, while noting, in the background, the preparations for the HDB’s upgrading work which, it was emphasised, was heavily subsidised by the government. The impending ‘revitalisation’ of Bukit Ho Swee Estate was now depicted to be an integral part of its ongoing history:

The Kim Seng story is a reflection of Singapore’s success. It tells the tale of how, like the legendary phoenix, it rose from the ashes of burnt-out slums, and is today being upgraded and transformed to meet the needs of residents in the 21st century.⁴³

At present, the Bukit Ho Swee myth is solidly integrated into the national narrative of the Singapore Story. In celebrating Singapore’s 40th year of independence in 2005, the Ministry of Education produced a book titled *Today in History*, in which school students wrote about an important event in Singapore’s history which fell on their own birthdays. A student from Nanyang Primary School, whose entry was selected for the book, wrote about the readiness of the Singapore Fire Brigade to deal with emergencies like the Bukit Ho Swee fire. Her classmate accurately drew an accompanying picture of seven wooden houses burning amid strong winds, only one of which was being reached by a jet of water from a fire engine standing on a track marked ‘one way’.⁴⁴ Two years later, a newly revised secondary textbook on the history of Singapore written by curriculum planners in the Ministry of Education was launched. Its aim was to cultivate creative and critical thinking skills among students by offering different perspectives on historical events. However, in the unit on the ‘Nation Building Years’, in which the 1961 fire was taught, the emphasis was on Singapore’s ‘constraints and vulnerabilities’ and the ‘key values, attitudes and skills Singaporeans need in order to ensure the survival

⁴² Sumiko Tan, *Kim Seng: A Reflection of Singapore’s Success* (Singapore: Kim Seng Publication Committee, 1996), Foreword.

⁴³ Tan, *Kim Seng*, pp. 13, 17.

⁴⁴ MOE, *Today in History* (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 2005).

and success of the nation’.⁴⁵ Not unexpectedly, the Bukit Ho Swee story as told in the textbook merely underlined the HDB’s work in clearing ‘slums and squatter settlements’ in the 1960s.⁴⁶

Elsewhere, the significance of the Bukit Ho Swee fire has also been jealously safeguarded by government institutions or statutory boards whose history was closely bound up with the event. The Singapore Civil Defence Force Heritage Galley at the Central Fire Station contains two fire engines lined up in front of a sign, ‘Bukit Ho Swee’. A short distance away is a model of 2-storey wooden houses, ablaze, and a television screen showing video footage of how the fire engines were ‘slowed down by narrow, cluttered lanes and hindered by a crowd of onlookers’, while ‘well-meaning volunteers grabbed water hoses to spray water haphazardly instead of effectively’. This exhibit places the blame for the destruction caused by the fire squarely on the volunteers and onlookers, just as present-day Singaporeans are reminded, similarly, that ‘we have learnt the extent of damage and destruction a disaster can cause, we have come a long way since then, and must never take things for granted’.⁴⁷

At the Heritage Gallery located at the HDB Hub, is a recreated living room of an HDB flat in the 1970s, with an old-style ‘tear out’ Chinese calendar on the wall showing the day ‘25 May’. A couple and their son are seated on a sofa, watching video footage of the 1961 fire. They see a mother and five children fleeing from the blaze (described in Chapter 6), fire hoses held by volunteers but wildly spraying, and finally, the completion of emergency housing on the fire site. In subsequent decades, as portrayed through other exhibits, public housing in Singapore continued on the developmental path of progress, from ‘Our Home, Our Community’ in the 1970s and ‘Total Living Environment’ in the 1980s to ‘Building Unique Identities’ in the 1990s, and now ‘World Class Public Housing’ in the new

⁴⁵ CPDD, MOE, *History Syllabus: Lower Secondary*, 2005, pp. 3-4, 14.

<http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/syllabuses/humanities-and-aesthetics/files/history-lower-secondary-2006.pdf>, accessed 15 Apr 2008.

⁴⁶ CPDD, MOE, *Singapore: From Settlement to Nation, Pre-1819 to 1971* (Singapore: EPB Pan Pacific, 2007), pp. 206-7.

⁴⁷ SCDF Heritage Galley, Central Fire Station, Hill Street, visited on 15 Sep 2006; SCDF, ‘The Story of Fireman 251’, pamphlet for the SCDF Heritage Gallery.

millennium.⁴⁸ Finally, at the newly-renovated National Museum of Singapore, there is an attempt to incorporate a diversity of voices from the past. In the section named 'Singapore and the World, 1945-1970', the experience of resettlement is acknowledged to be 'both exciting and sometimes traumatic', with an un-named Malay interviewee lamenting that one could not resist the PAP government's acquisition of land for public development. Nearby, however, is large video exhibit of the Bukit Ho Swee fire, with the fire victims shown to be moving into 'modern flats built on the previous slums' within nine months.⁴⁹

The official mythology which has emerged from the HDB's eradication of the urban kampongs is so powerful that when Lim Kim San passed away on 20 July 2006, he was duly remembered by the government as 'Mr HDB'. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated in his eulogy for Lim that 'most Singaporeans [had] lived in overcrowded slums and squatter colonies, breeding grounds for crime and gangsterism'.⁵⁰ This was almost a verbatim account of the description given by Alan



Plate 10.3: The Bukit Ho Swee fire exhibit at the Civil Defence Heritage Gallery, Central Fire Station, 2006 (Photograph by author).

⁴⁸ HDB Gallery, HDB Hub, Toa Payoh, visited on 19 Sep 2006.

⁴⁹ NMS, Singapore History Gallery, Stamford Road, visited on 14 Dec 2007.

⁵⁰ *ST*, 24 Jul 2006.



Plate 10.4: The Bukit Ho Swee fire exhibit at the HDB Gallery, HDB Hub, 2006 (Photograph by author).

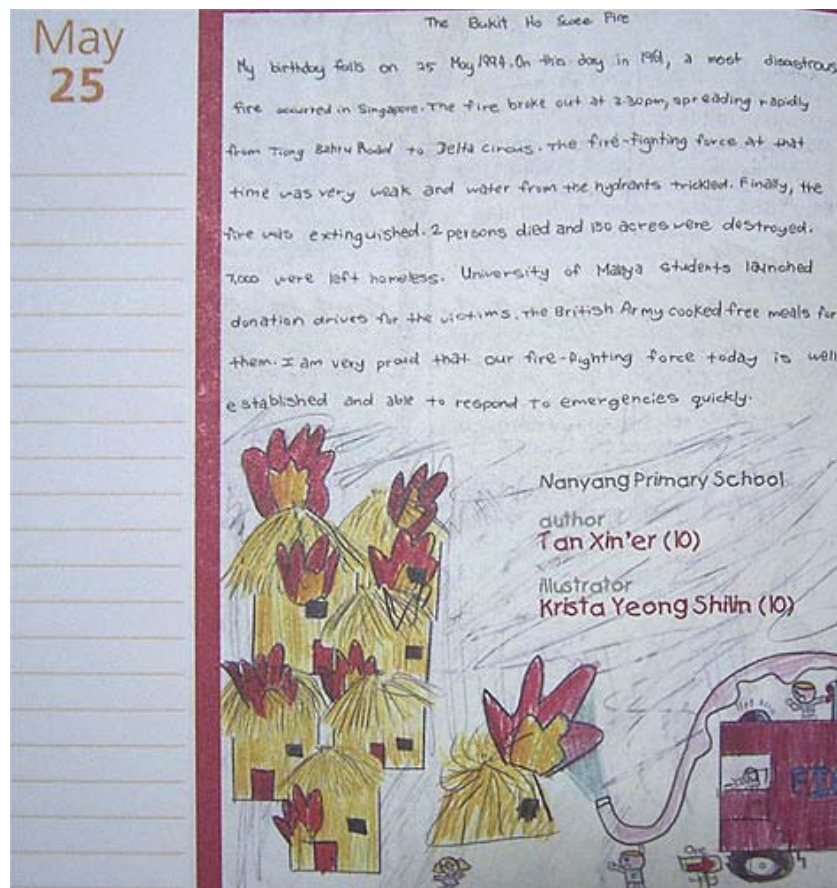


Plate 10.5: The intersection of historical event, education and social memory. MOE, *Today in History* (Singapore: Ministry of Education, 2005).

Choe, the HDB architect-planner, in 1969 of the inner city slums as being the 'breeding grounds of crime and disease'.⁵¹ In August the following year, Howe Yoon Chong, the former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of National Development and Chief Executive Officer of the HDB, also passed away. Both Howe and Lim Kim San were applauded for 'fast-tracking' the public housing programme in the early 1960s,⁵² and Singaporeans were once again reminded of Howe's 'reputation as a "bulldozer" who relentlessly pushed through obstacles to get things done'.⁵³ President S. R. Nathan acknowledged Howe's key role in the established narrative of the PAP's struggle against both 'communists' and 'squatters' in the 1960s:

It was he who undertook with determination and dedication the politically and technically arduous task of getting the township of Toa Payoh started. He stood up against organised opposition to the resettlement of Toa Payoh and the removal of squatters. The opposition was formidable, as it was led by Communist United Front agitators who vehemently obstructed him to the point of violence.⁵⁴

When I spoke to former fire victims in the course of my fieldwork in 2006-2007, two generations after the 1961 inferno, the influence of the official representations of the event was clearly evident. Spoken on behalf of by the authorities and depicted as the reified Other in the 1950s and 1960s before being embraced as the model citizen in the 1980s, former fire victims have generally assimilated at least part of the official discourse in their memories of the fire. Rare is the case of Cheong Soon Onn, who experienced a fire in his 1-room rental flat at Jalan Bukit Merah in August 2007. Cheong, whose family had lost their wooden house and medical hall in the 1961 blaze, asked, 'Can you believe it, twice in my lifetime? I can only thank the gods that I'm still alive'.⁵⁵ For other fire victims like James Seah, the 1961 disaster contained an important set of lessons for themselves and for young Singaporeans. For Seah, the inferno inevitably enabled the

⁵¹ Alan Choe, 'Urban Renewal', in Ooi Jin-Bee & Chiang Hai Ding (eds), *Modern Singapore*, (Singapore: University of Singapore, 1969), p. 163.

⁵² *ST*, 22 Aug 2007.

⁵³ *ST*, 23 Aug 2007.

⁵⁴ *ST*, 23 Aug 2007.

⁵⁵ *ST*, 5 Aug 2007.

government to suppress the secret societies and assist low-income families to break out of the cycle of poverty as their children acquired higher education. Seah consequently viewed 'the fire at Bukit Ho Swee as a breakthrough for the PAP government to really change the whole socio-economic landscape of a big part of Singapore', and he felt proud that 'my days have to be tied up to Singapore's starting time'.⁵⁶

For many former fire victims, a sense of loyalty to the nation and support for the government have inextricably merged with the passage of time. Tay Bok Chiu remarked that 'last time we scolded Lee Kuan Yew but now we understand what is good and what is bad', particularly because the government had effectively eradicated the kampong's secret societies after the fire.⁵⁷ Husband and wife, Lai Chee Lung and Yap Kuai Yong, who moved into a 1-room flat in Bukit Ho Swee Estate due to the fear of fire in their wooden house at Kallang, likewise recalled that life had previously been '*jin cham*' ('very difficult'):

People say today that the government is no good. I think the government is superb! [Laughs] If not for the government, we wouldn't have such a good life. Once the PAP came to power, they built flats, community centres, it was great. I was so happy to move into the flat. People who say the government is not good nowadays do not know how *cham* it was in the past.⁵⁸

Even Tan Tiam Ho, who once argued against the government's elitist educational policy, felt that the rebuilding of Bukit Ho Swee was necessary for the nation's development. 'If the government had not built these flats' after the fire, Tan asked, 'how would the people have lived? There were more and more people in Singapore, how would they have lived?' Tan, though, still retains sufficient self-awareness to say, with a laugh, 'Now we Singaporeans are obedient like a dog to the government'.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Author's interview with James Seah, 21 Oct 2006.

⁵⁷ Author's interview with Tay Bok Chiu, 24 Jan 2007.

⁵⁸ Author's interviews with Yap Kuai Yong and Lai Chee Lung, 16 Jun 2007.

⁵⁹ Author's interview with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007. Tan's argument with Seah Mui Kok is recounted in the previous chapter.

Lim Yock Eng, who has been involved in grassroots activities in Bukit Ho Swee Estate, believed that the PAP government's real achievement, facilitated by the 1961 fire, was the social mobilisation of former kampong dwellers into becoming active citizens of the state:

Today, with all the progress we have made, our leadership deserves not a little credit. Last time, when we were young, we did not care about the country's affairs. We were really like a pile of sand. I believe that the country is governed very well now. Because I have stayed in Bukit Ho Swee, and this fire burned a large area, so after this, many HDB flats were built here. From here, it developed into other places, until today. So how we have progressed today is also due to the impact of the Bukit Ho Swee fire.⁶⁰

Tay Ah Chuan, another grassroots leader, similarly agreed that the inferno was a blessing in disguise; after the fire, he explained, 'the mindset of the people of Bukit Ho Swee slowly began to change. The most important thing was to disperse the "black area"'.⁶¹ Such firm support for the PAP government is, in fact, common among elderly residents who experienced the rapid social transformation of Singapore in the 1960s, including even its repercussions. Since 1963, Bukit Ho Swee constituency has been an unassailable PAP stronghold.⁶² In particular, Lee Kuan Yew's resolute response to the calamity left a deep, lasting impression on the

⁶⁰ Author's interview with Lim Yock Eng, 21 Feb 2006.

⁶¹ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

⁶² In 1968, Seah Mui Kok was uncontested in Bukit Ho Swee constituency. He won 69% of the vote four years later against Barisan Sosialis and Workers' Party candidates. In 1976, Seah improved his electoral support to 75% against a United Front candidate, and enjoyed a walkover in 1980. In the 1984 elections, Bukit Ho Swee was merged with Kim Seng constituency, with Yeo Ning Hong becoming its new Member of Parliament due to a walkover. In 1988, Yeo won two thirds of the vote against a Workers' Party challenger. Three years later, Kim Seng was subsumed under the 4-ward Group Representation Constituency of Kampong Glam, which was uncontested. In the following elections in 1997, Kim Seng was amalgamated into the 4-ward Kreta Ayer-Tanglin GRC, which enjoyed likewise a walkover, enabling Lily Neo to become the new MP. Merged into Jalan Besar GRC in 1997, the five-member PAP team, including Neo, defeated challengers from the Singapore Democratic Alliance in winning three quarters of the vote. In the last elections in 2006, the PAP team for Jalan Besar GRC triumphed again against Singapore Democratic Alliance opposition, polling 69% of the vote. Lily Neo is the present MP of Bukit Ho Swee. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Bukit Ho Swee, with its large graying population, remains strongly pro-PAP. Singapore Elections, <http://www.singapore-elections.com>, accessed 15 Apr 2008.

fire victims. Tay Yan Woon, for instance, vividly remembers the day he spoke to the fire victims:

Lee Kuan Yew was very young then, *lua hiong* [‘very impressive’], only about 30 years old, and he wore a pair of long black trousers and a pair of canvas shoes. He went to interview people on a jeep.

While Tay had grieved over the loss of the kampong lifestyle after the fire and her inability to rear poultry in an HDB flat, she was certain that ‘if Singapore did not have Lee Kuan Yew, our lives would have been very hard’.⁶³

Romancing the Kampong, Rebooting the Estate

The 1996 community history, *Kim Seng: A Reflection of Singapore’s Success*, illustrates that the PAP government, in remembering the recent past, does not seek to encourage nostalgia for the kampong but rather to mobilise popular support for its new redevelopment schemes. In 2007, a grassroots publication framed the 1961 and 1968 Bukit Ho Swee blazes as belonging to an irretrievable past. Signs of their destruction, it stated, were no longer evident in present-day Bukit Ho Swee, with its ‘mostly new and upgraded blocks of flats in pink and blue, and condominiums’, while one long-time resident was quoted as saying that although people missed the kampong lifestyle when they first moved into the emergency flats, ‘[n]ow, no one would want to move back’.⁶⁴

Kim Seng: A Reflection of Singapore’s Success and an entire corpus of semi-official public histories of spatial communities in Singapore since the 1990s are essentially documents about social mobilisation.⁶⁵ A good example of this genre of

⁶³ Author’s interview with Tay Yan Woon, 28 Sep 2006.

⁶⁴ Sharon Seow, ‘The Big Fire’, in Central Singapore District, *Voices*, Nov/Dec 2007, p. 16.

⁶⁵ See for instance Sumiko Tan, *Chai Chee Revisited* (Singapore: Kampong Chai Chee Citizens’ Consultative Committee, 1993); *Toa Payoh Town: From Swamp Land to Modern Living* (Singapore: Toa Payoh Town Council, 1994); *Bukit Merah: From a Hilly Kampong to a Modern Town* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1996); Koh Buck Song, *Toa Payoh: Our Kind of Neighbourhood: The HDB 40th Anniversary Commemorative Publication* (Singapore: Times Media for Housing & Development Board, 2000); Lily Kong & T. C. Chang, *Joo Chiat: A Living Legacy* (Singapore: Joo Chiat Citizens’ Consultative Committee : National Archives of Singapore, 2001); *North East:*

literature is the National Archives of Singapore coffee table book, *Kampong Days* (1993), which took a seemingly nostalgic look at the children's games, social festivities and communal life of the rural kampongs in postwar Singapore.⁶⁶ *Kampong Days* focussed almost exclusively on Malay kampongs and fishing villages and Chinese rural kampongs, ignoring the 'Black Belt' which had stood at the City limits. Upon closer scrutiny, the book's reminiscences of the kampongs of yesterday is highly selective, based on the hope that 'those who had lived in the kampongs will try and pass on to our younger generation Singaporeans our memories, the joys, the inconveniences, hardships and most importantly the kampong values of neighbourliness, thrift and hard work'.⁶⁷ Subsequent community histories were even more explicit in mobilising mass support for the HDB's social 'revitalisation' programmes for its older estates in the 1990s: the Main Upgrading Programme and the Selective En Bloc Redevelopment Programme. The phrase 'kampong spirit' began to appear in the mass media and public history books to refer, somewhat ironically, to newer public housing estates built over former kampongs in the outlying areas of the island; Bishan, Woodlands, Tampines, and Jalan Kayu estates were all lauded in 1992 for possessing the characteristic 'kampong spirit' of neighbourly relations and mutual self-help.⁶⁸ The unwritten association, which pragmatically inverted the official language of modern housing planning, was to persuade residents of aging estates like Bukit Ho Swee to support the HDB's upgrading and redevelopment schemes in order to rekindle the 'kampong spirit' of the newer estates! In 1996, for instance, the launch of the SERS in Bukit Merah coincided with the publication of *Bukit Merah: From a Hilly Kampong to a Modern Town*, which by telling the story of the community's progress towards modernity prepared present-day elderly residents in the estate for another requisite round of housing demolition and redevelopment.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, despite selective official representations of the kampongs and public housing, among the former kampong-dwelling population of Bukit Ho Swee,

Remembering the Olden Days (Singapore: Charlton Park Residents' Association Neighborhood Committee: Northeast Community Development Council, 2002).

⁶⁶ NAS, *Kampong Days: Village Life and Times in Singapore Revisited*, K. F. Tang (ed.) (Singapore: National Archives, 1993).

⁶⁷ NAS, *Kampong Days*, Foreword.

⁶⁸ *ST*, 21 Jan 1992, 11 Sep 1992, 8 Oct 1992.

⁶⁹ *ST*, 16 Jul 1995.

there still survives a sense of nostalgia which is independent of and in some ways diametrically opposed to the PAP government's forward-looking modernist philosophy of governance. From the beginning, children who have moved from wooden to modern housing had grown increasingly nostalgic for the freedom of social life in the kampong era.⁷⁰ Moreover, by the 1980s, many former fire victims, now approaching middle age, were reflecting on the sheer pace of social change in the preceding two decades and yearned for a simpler time when, for example, they could buy a bowl of noodles for 20 cents. As Lee Soo Seong told me, 'we have gained much but also lost much'.⁷¹ The growing sense of social nostalgia also coincided with the PAP government's 'turn to history' in the early 1980s. In particular, the official use of recent history to discipline a generation of young Singaporeans struck a personal chord among aging former kampong dwellers, many of whom had experienced the anguish of their children leaving flats upon marriage for larger housing further away. It came as no surprise, then, that much of the elderly people's recollections are directed squarely at young Singaporeans. In addition, there is a tendency even among former kampong dwellers who had been relatively well-to-do to tell their life stories within a 'hard times', 'rags to riches' narrative, which parallels the Singapore Story. But despite the similarities between the popular and official reminiscences of kampong life, the ordinary people's memories remain, to some extent, autonomous. Nostalgia for the kampong, as Chua Beng Huat observed, is 'an intrinsic critique of the present by the ordinary people' of the more regulated and stressful life; it belies a desire for 'recovering control over daily life within the present zone of material comfort', although the individual accepts that this cannot be accomplished.⁷² It is this search for alternative meanings of the 'kampong days' which makes oral history work in Singapore both viable and valuable. The PAP government's selective promotion of the kampong past has consequently had the unintended effect of creating a mythological kampong which is implicitly critical of the high modernist development that has occurred in Singapore.

This alternative kampong myth has only partially surfaced in published works. There have been, since the 1980s, a number of biographies by former

⁷⁰ Michael Smithies, *A Singapore Boyhood* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1984), p. iii.

⁷¹ Author's interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

⁷² Chua Beng Huat, 'Nostalgia for the Kampung', *Political Legitimacy and Housing: Stakeholding in Singapore* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 162, 166.

wooden house dwellers remembering, as children, the ‘good old kampong days’, particularly the rustic, carefree life and the neighbourliness of the community.⁷³ These works do not overtly contest the official discourse on kampong clearance and rehousing. Peter Wee’s account of living in Kampong Amber in the 1950s accepted that the kampong’s clearance at the end of the decade to make way for redevelopment was inevitable and, given the insanitary living conditions and constant fire hazard, indeed necessary.⁷⁴ Resistance against resettlement is usually not mentioned in these biographies, as are the rumours of arson. Victor Seah, who broached the question of arson from a third person perspective, located such incidents in the context of racial conflict between Malays and Chinese in the 1960s.⁷⁵ A historical novel, published in 1984, on the collective experiences of a group of former kampong children, acknowledged the possibility of arson but with the caveat that the truth behind the rumours remained unknown.⁷⁶

Experiences of kampong life consequently emerge more fully by word of mouth. An important theme from the recollections is the child in the kampong. My elderly informant typically recalls a time when they were young and, as Lim You Meng surmised, ‘很自由, 很自在’ (‘very free’ and ‘very carefree’),⁷⁷ ‘free’, that is, from parental supervision and to engage in play in the kampong’s open areas. Marc Cheok (born in 1956), who resided at Havelock Road below Ma Kau Thiong in the 1950s, fondly remembers his days as a ‘kampong kid’ playing with kites.⁷⁸ Similarly, Oh Gek Heok recounts her joyous kampong days when she and her friends played with marbles in the day and listened to stories over the Rediffusion at night. ‘It was a happy time’, she reflected, ‘People today don’t do that anymore’. What has also been lost, according to Oh, was the remarkable physical toughness of the kampong children; if one, barefoot, stepped on a nail, they did not worry about tetanus but simply ‘took off our slipper and hit our foot with it, and when the blood stopped running, we continued running about’.⁷⁹

⁷³ See for instance Felix Chia, *Reminiscences* (Singapore: Magro International, 1984); and Peter H. L. Wee, *From Farm and Kampong* (Singapore: G. Brash, 1989).

⁷⁴ Wee, *From Farm and Kampong*, pp. 104-5.

⁷⁵ Victor Tiong Hin Seah, *A Life Worth Reliving* (Singapore: T. H. Seah, 2002), pp. 136-37.

⁷⁶ Smithies, *A Singapore Boyhood*, p. 22.

⁷⁷ Author’s interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

⁷⁸ Email correspondence with Marc Cheok, 25 Mar 2007.

⁷⁹ Author’s interview with Oh Gek Heok, 10 Apr 2007.

These selective memories of urban kampong life, seen through youthful eyes, are really, part of a narrative of both regeneration and loss.⁸⁰ They are acutely accentuated by the closely managed way of life which progressively emerged after the 1961 fire, especially in terms of the official regulations and financial demands of living in an HDB flat, and the psychological stress and social discipline of full-time work in the formal economy. Life in the kampong is always contrasted against that in public housing and consequently diverges markedly from the official discourse. Lim You Meng believed that Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, despite its secret societies, was not a dangerous place but ‘最有人情味’ (‘a warm place to live in’).⁸¹ Lee Soo Seong agreed that ‘life was simple and backward but was full of charm back then’.⁸² When I asked Peter Lim about kampong life, he exclaimed, ‘It was a fantastic place; it was a place where you were so close to nature. And the neighbours, they didn’t put a wall to each other like nowadays in the flats’.⁸³ Sim Kim Boey related in amusement that ‘we could walk through people’s houses and they could walk through ours. [Laughs] It was strange but very good. No one would steal anything when going in and out of someone else’s home, and the residents also wouldn’t question you’.⁸⁴ According to Joyce Soh, who currently resides in an HDB flat, living in a kampong was happier, safer and warmer than residing in public housing:

We helped one another much more in the past. Now, if you stay in an HDB flat, everyone closes their doors. In the kampong, we got along very well, we went to buy groceries together. People in the past were more genuine and honest. We left our doors open. There was no need to lock them. The door was wooden and we just placed a chair against it, that was all. There were no cases of theft because if some stranger came into the kampong, everyone would know about it.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Ryan Bishop, John Phillips & Wei-Wei Yeo (eds), *Beyond Description: Singapore Space Historicity* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 7-8.

⁸¹ Author’s interview with Lim You Meng, 13 Apr 2007.

⁸² Author’s interview with Lee Soo Seong, 11 Oct 2006.

⁸³ Author’s interview with Peter Lim, 8 Feb 2007.

⁸⁴ Author’s interview with Sim Kim Boey, 14 Feb 2007.

⁸⁵ Author’s interview with Joyce Soh, 5 Apr 2007.

Alongside this social critique of modernity in Singapore is the anger felt by many former fire victims towards young Singaporeans. Born in 1972 and after the inferno, I was, to many of them, ‘young’, and in many of my oral history interviews, the participants assumed dual roles as both informant and interrogator. Long-time friends in the kampong and neighbours today at Block 79, Indus Road, Tay Choo and Beh Poh Suan (who was widowed and caring for her infant child by herself before the fire) insisted that it was both comfortable and safe to live in an attap house. But they also went beyond reminiscing about the past to tell me, pointedly, ‘For our generation, everyone’s life was *tong kor*. Only your generation has a better life. Our generation, if you asked ten people, nine of them had difficult lives. Your parents would know the difficult days’.⁸⁶ Tay Yan Woon similarly felt that ‘it would have been good if the fire had not broken out then, living in the attap house was so good’, although her life then was, as she admitted, difficult. Directing her comments at me, Tay lamented how young Singaporeans do not know the Hokkien names of the local places in Bukit Ho Swee or the immense hardship people suffered in the past:

People nowadays are better off. Your mother would have experienced it before, she would know how hard life was last time. Our lives a few decades back were so pitiful, especially my generation. My generation was the most pitiful of all. Those who are 30 plus to 40, it was not so difficult.⁸⁷

Almost insistent at times in highlighting the differences between the older and younger generations, Oh Boon Eng spoke passionately of the beauty, wonder and absolute freedom of his childhood days in Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, where the children ‘were very innocent and ignorant of everything’. He emphasised the physical and mental strength borne out of the hard times which had apparently dissipated; there was no way, he insisted, that I could undertake the manual work people had done in the past.⁸⁸ Roy Chan similarly remarked, ‘We were the *chin chai* [‘easygoing’] type. Everyday whatever food was cooked, we just ate it; whatever

⁸⁶ Author’s interviews with Tay Choo and Beh Poh Suan, 14 Feb 2007.

⁸⁷ Author’s interview with Tay Yan Woon, 28 Sep 2006.

⁸⁸ Author’s interview with Oh Eng Boon, 4 Apr 2007.

porridge, whether there was fish, meat or vegetables. At that time, this was common. We couldn't be choosy. Of course today the children are different; they want to go to the food court [Laughs]'.⁸⁹

The young Singaporean is consequently the target for two very different discourses on kampong life. By reclaiming the past, elderly Singaporeans are reasserting their place in the present just as the PAP government is attempting to maintain its political hegemony through the use of history. In fact, the social malleability of the past within living memory could be used against any unpopular social development in the present. As Shirley Tan told me, 'People last time wouldn't get deceived unless they were unlucky. People last time wouldn't do that'. Shifting comfortably from the past to the present, Tan commented on the large numbers of foreigners working in Singapore:

People last time did not fall sick. If his area was not clean, he would sweep it himself. Now in Singapore, why are there people throwing litter? Now, there are many foreigners who have come here. We don't know who threw the litter. The foreigners are staying in the houses too, and they would just throw the litter. We don't know whether it is Singaporeans or foreigners who threw the litter.⁹⁰

When I interviewed him, Tay Ah Chuan candidly revealed that Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, with its secret societies, was a renowned 'black area' in 1950s Singapore; many of the *pai kia* were in fact his primary school mates. Yet Tay possessed both an admiration for the development under the PAP government and an ambivalence towards the social consequences of the progress. For him, living in a modern nation-state had irreversibly changed young Singaporeans' mindset, and not necessarily for the better:

In the past, you could not survive on your own. Like a secret society could not be made up of one person. They depended on the group to survive. Your generation now is different. You take the individual as

⁸⁹ Author's interview with Roy Chan, 2 Apr 2007.

⁹⁰ Author's interview with Shirley Tan, 13 Feb 2006.

the unit, right? You think, I am capable, I can be a director. You don't depend on the group.

Tay's 'black area', consequently, is remembered with a tinge of pride.⁹¹

James Seah, telling me of a nasty slip he once suffered while climbing down the muddy slopes on his way home from Kai Kok School in the 1950s, emphasised the need for young people to know about the Bukit Ho Swee fire:

If the young people met with us during those times, then they'll have the fear. It's just like bringing this little kid, who shouts like that, influenced by Western democracy, and putting him in our time to go through the racial riots, the labour strikes, the fire. Then maybe they will realise that we have gone through hardship.

But, as Seah is also aware, it is frustratingly difficult to fully convey the sense of a terrifying event outside the experience of young Singaporeans:

There is no media, however effective, whether it is video, visual, that can recreate the situation. How do I describe to you the day when it was on fire and we ran? Then the next day, when we came back and saw all was gone? That element of living through a certain period can never be replicated. There was a time when I liked to go to various parts of Malaysia, to the kampongs, and sit around the coffeeshops and see how slowly time passes by. *Ah*, that! I talked to my children, and they say, 'Where got such things?' Even the smell, how do I describe to you the smell of the feces pond in front of a house? This is something that I am very fearful of for the children. Because they can't imagine the hardship that their parents went through.⁹²

⁹¹ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 21 Feb 2006.

⁹² Author's interview with James Seah, 21 Oct 2006. At present, tech-savvy Seah manages an Internet discussion forum on Bukit Ho Swee and a photo-blog to bring the memories and lessons of Singapore history to younger Singaporeans. The sites are 'Walk Down Memory Lane' at <http://www.phlog.net/user/thimbuktu>, accessed 15 Apr 2008, and the Facebook group, 'I grew up in Bukit Ho Swee', <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=21314871472>, accessed 15 Apr 2008.

My informants' recollections of the kampong lifestyle are consequently critiques of both high modernity in present-day Singapore and of the perceived ignorance and complacency of young Singaporeans. In both aspects, nostalgia for the kampong reveals an ambivalence towards one's inability to locate their identity and historical agency in a continuously changing high modernist society.

Undying Rumours

If, in the social myth of Kampong Bukit Ho Swee, life in the village is still warmly remembered by its former residents, its destruction by fire on 25 May 1961 holds an even more uncertain place in their recollections. The nostalgia and the belief in government-inspired arson have reinforced each other in sustaining a partially independent set of social memories; recollections which in turn have made possible the re-creation, through oral history, of the semi-autonomous ways of life in the urban kampongs partially reconstructed in this study.

Not surprisingly, the unresolved question of the cause of the 1961 inferno is rarely mentioned by government officials or in the mass media. But, interestingly, it was broached in a 29-part Chinese drama series titled *Bukit Ho Swee*, produced by the state-owned MediaCorp in 2002. The series traced the lives of a group of residents in Kampong Bukit Ho Swee in the 1950s up to the outbreak of the great fire.⁹³ Advertised as 'an epic of true compassion', 'where kindness and warmth precede' and 'where strangers with different lives unite', the series was essentially a love story which mixed the contrasting themes of good neighbourliness and social danger in the context of the kampong.⁹⁴ The gangsters in the series frequently harassed the locals living at the margins of society, such as a pirate taxi driver, an unlicensed hawker, and a nightsoil worker. The fire hazard in the kampong was simply attributed to the actions of the locals; in two separate episodes, the gangsters threatened to raze the settlement to the ground if the residents refused to pay them protection money. The threat of fire, consequently, became a mere plot device. On two other occasions, the villagers also accidentally started fires due to their

⁹³ MediaCorp, *Bukit Ho Swee*, broadcast on Channel 8 between 25 March & 25 April 2002.

⁹⁴ *8 Days*, No. 598, 21-28 Mar 2002 (Singapore: SBC Enterprises Pte Ltd).

negligence, and eventually one of the residents, having lost his sanity, burned down the kampong. The TV drama series consequently made no attempt to revise the terms of the official narrative on the fire.

Although no former fire victim has yet written about the cause of the inferno, the rumours of arson have left an indelible imprint on the relationship between the government and the citizenry. On the surface, the PAP's political control is nothing short of hegemonic. The party has never lost more than four parliamentary seats in a general election since 1963 or seen its popular vote fall under 61%. The PAP's ideological hegemony is demonstrated by the fact that the citizenry has generally accepted the official line that the near-universal provision of public housing has served their material interests.⁹⁵ This political dominance, however, has not created an 'affective' relationship between the PAP and the people.⁹⁶ On the contrary, the relationship has been based on a pragmatic exchange of goods – votes for the government and material rewards, including the ability to own a modern flat, for the people. In addition, the government's management of spaces in contemporary Singapore has met with a mixture of 'collusion, conflict, and collision' from the citizenry, which has protested against policies considered to be inimical to individual or community interests.⁹⁷ In short, what Singaporeans want both for themselves and from the government are deeply conflicting.

In this context, Lim Kim San's death in 2006 precipitated critical and emotional responses on Internet discussion forums, particularly from elderly Singaporeans who remember the days when Lim presided over the kampong clearance campaign. Despite extensive government controls over the Internet in Singapore, the perceived anonymity provided by the medium has emboldened Singaporeans to candidly comment on sensitive topics, which would not have materialised in a public forum.⁹⁸ In the popular *Sammyboy.com's Alfresco Coffee Shop*, a hotbed of anti-PAP discussions, the historical association between fires and

⁹⁵ Chua, 'Public Housing and Political Legitimacy', *Political Legitimacy and Housing*, p. 132.

⁹⁶ Catherine Lim, 'The PAP and the People: A Great Affective Divide', *ST*, 3 Sep 1994.

⁹⁷ Lily Kong and Brenda S. A. Yeoh, *The Politics of Landscapes in Singapore: Constructions of "Nation"* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

⁹⁸ Garry Rodan, 'The Internet and Political Control in Singapore', *Political Science Quarterly*, 113 (1), Spring 1998, p. 75; and 'Embracing Electronic Media but Suppressing Civil Society: Authoritarian Consolidation in Singapore', *The Pacific Review*, 16 (4) 2003, p. 520.

kampong clearance was vividly recalled following Lim's death. A poster named e_visionary asked rhetorically, 'How many kampong was burned due to a man?',⁹⁹ to which ÎÚÅ replied, 'Yes, I heard stories about "government people" 'purplely' [purposely] burn down kampong to make way for new flats when all negotiations failed'.¹⁰⁰ In a separate thread on Kampong Bukit Ho Swee started before Lim Kim San's death, mockingbir9 replied that 'every old folks will be able to tell u BHS was burnt down by the arrogant PAPies. Burning the whole suburb was much easier option than time consuming eradicating the residents in stages, amid of threats from gangsters and huge compensations etc', and concluded, 'This is an untold story and we will know only one day someone will surface to tell the truth of the saga of BHS fire'.¹⁰¹ Another poster, merlion, simply suggested, 'Ask Lim Kim San...he knows what really happen to Bukit Ho Swee'.¹⁰²

It is not merely the elderly people who are interested in Kampong Bukit Ho Swee and the great fire which destroyed it. A general revival of interest in the country's history has led, for instance, to the appearance of Internet blogs offering independent, even critical, perspectives of the recent past, such as *YawningBread*, *Singapore Angle*, *Citizen Historian*, and *s/pores*.¹⁰³ Consequently, Singaporeans one or two generations younger, who allegedly are 'complacent' about the nation's future, have begun to ask critical questions about the untold, unwritten past. In 2006, prior to Lim Kim San's death, the pilot episode of a Malay-language documentary series boldly posed the question, 'What caused the Bukit Ho Swee fire?'. The programme featured interviews with a former resident, a fire-fighter, a fire officer, a senior civil servant, a sociologist, and a history researcher (myself), none of whom acknowledged the possibility of arson. This refusal to publicly discuss the issue,

⁹⁹ e_visionary, 'LIM KIM SAN, May you RIP.....', *Sammyboy.com's Alfresco Coffee Shop*, 20 Jul 2006, <http://forums.delphiforums.com/sammyboy/mod>, accessed 15 Apr 2008.

¹⁰⁰ ÎÚÅ, 'LIM KIM SAN, May you RIP.....', *Sammyboy.com's Alfresco Coffee Shop*, 20 Jul 2006, accessed 15 Apr 2008.

¹⁰¹ mockingbir9, 'Ch 8: Bukit Ho Swee', *Sammyboy.com's Alfresco Coffee Shop*, 6 Jul 2006, accessed 15 April 2008. I started the thread to inquire about the Chinese drama series, *Bukit Ho Swee*.

¹⁰² merlion, 'Ch 8: Bukit Ho Swee', *Sammyboy.com's Alfresco Coffee Shop*, 6 Jul 2006, accessed 15 Apr 2008.

¹⁰³ *s/pores*, for instance, was launched in April 2006 with an inaugural issue on the political history of pre-1965 Singapore, which included contributions from former political detainees. 'This period of "open politics" before the consolidation of PAP rule', the editors explained, 'is the starting point of enquiries when home scholars attempt to explore if there were alternative logics to that of the Singapore Story which it has silenced'. *s/pores: New Directions in Singapore Studies*, <http://spores.wordpress.com>, accessed 15 Apr 2008.

much less endorse the theory, highlights the sensitivity of the topic despite the intervening years. It is also indicative of the mindset of young Singaporeans, however, that questions such as these, which impinge directly on the birth of modern Singapore, are being asked. The episode concluded, in striking postmodernist fashion, 'There are various versions to history. It is all up to you to make your own conclusions'.¹⁰⁴

Regardless of how the mass media has approached the cause of the fire, away from public and official spheres, the rumours continued to be whispered, debated and denied among elderly people. Most of my interviewees attempted to sidetrack the question, and I often had to emphasise that I was not trying to establish the theory *per se* but only to understand *why* many people had believed in it. My informants were typically much more comfortable in suggesting other possible causes such as an untended cooking fire, malicious neighbours, secret societies, greedy landowners, and communists. My father, for instance, was certain that it did not make sense for the PAP to set the fire, since the disaster would have created a great burden on the government to provide relief for the fire victims. The rumours, he emphasised, were baseless and it was more likely that the fire was caused by the careless use of firecrackers.¹⁰⁵ They typically dismissed the rumours as *luan kong* ('wild talk'). As Tay Ah Chuan explained,

This problem is rather difficult to solve. You need evidence for such things. Even if there were eye-witnesses, it's useless without evidence. Singapore is all about law.

Tay is resigned to the fact that 'after the fire, everything was razed to the ground. [Laughs] It was impossible to find any evidence'.¹⁰⁶

My interviewees' frequent warnings that I should not speculate about the cause of the 1961 fire and that the rumours of arson were completely unsubstantiated are a clear indication that the former residents of a 'black area' have accepted the

¹⁰⁴ Oak3 films, *Jalan 2: The Bukit Ho Swee Fire*, broadcast on 11 Dec 2006.

¹⁰⁵ Author's interview with Loh Tian Ho, 13 Jan 2006.

¹⁰⁶ Author's interview with Tay Ah Chuan, 13 Sep 2006.

due processes of the law over the 'words between neighbours'. Lim Yock Eng cautioned that if there is 'no evidence, we cannot anyhow say'.¹⁰⁷ Similarly Ong Chye Ho stated, '这种话你不可说' ('this sort of things you cannot say'). An unnamed friend of Ong added, 'Even today, you cannot say that. If you interviewed him [Ong] and he said that, he would be in trouble'.¹⁰⁸ Someone even warned me that to ask such controversial questions would land me in prison; after telling me she had once personally seen a burning torch thrown onto an attap roof near the Great World Amusement Park, she stopped and said, 'We can't say, we will be arrested. Better not say. You also must not say'.¹⁰⁹ It seems that if there had been numerous people claiming arson at the time, it was always someone else, not themselves. Tan Tiam Ho, laughing, told me that it was the uneducated elderly people, particularly the women, who were spreading the rumours at the time.¹¹⁰ These statements, really, reflect the ultimate success of the PAP government in socialising former wooden house dwellers into becoming obedient citizens of the state.

Still, in my interviews, I could hear the echoes of the frenzied and emotional debates over the cause of the Bukit Ho Swee fire in the early 1960s. Some of my informants did acknowledge, with varying degrees of certainty, the possibility of arson. One of them said, with a smile, that the possibility was '50-50', because the fire had occurred coincidentally on a public holiday so that the children were not in school and consequently few people were killed.¹¹¹ Another informant was sure that the blaze was clearly 'Lee Kuan Yew's idea', that 'we know this is Lee Kuan Yew's system; he wanted to redevelop Singapore'.¹¹² Tay Bok Chiu remarked, 'There was no evidence of arson but of course it's hard to say. How can you just set the fire like that? People could get killed'.¹¹³ Tay's statement reflects a conviction that, if the government had really been responsible, its aim was to destroy the unauthorised wooden houses with a minimum loss of life. And in this belief in an ultimately benevolent if pragmatic government – one concerned with development for the

¹⁰⁷ Author's interview with Lim Yock Eng, 21 Feb 2006.

¹⁰⁸ Author's interview with Ong Chye Ho, 14 Feb 2007.

¹⁰⁹ Author's interview with Maggie Chong, 16 May 2007.

¹¹⁰ Author's interview with Tan Tiam Ho, 12 Mar 2007.

¹¹¹ Author's interview with Mok Lee Choo, 8 Jan 2007.

¹¹² Author's interview with Tony Yap, 7 May 2007.

¹¹³ Author's interview with Tay Bok Chiu, 24 Jan 2007.

benefit of its people – the relationship between the past and present becomes clearly visible. Even if one acknowledges the possibility of arson, they nevertheless acknowledge the government's philosophy and practice of development, and its outstanding track record, since the early 1960s.

Modern Singapore, in a very real sense, was born out of fire like the phoenix rising from the ashes, and consequently the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee inferno holds a complex place in the minds of contemporary Singaporeans. In the 1960s, the PAP government found it expedient to selectively mythologise the fire in its pursuit of social and economic development. Two decades later, the fire became equally useful for promoting another policy of social mobilisation: to cultivate among young Singaporeans a sense of the fragility of the nation-state and to discourage their alleged desire for parliamentary opposition. At the same time, the scale of rehousing in the past became relevant, in a personal sense, for persuading elderly Singaporeans of the need for the ongoing redevelopment and 'revitalisation' of HDB estates in the 1990s. Publicly, the Bukit Ho Swee myth remains unchallenged, and indeed many former fire victims I interviewed have embraced the progressivist aspects of the official narrative. Privately, however, independent views of both kampong life and the rumours of government-inspired arson have persisted into the present. Both the nostalgia with which the former is often remembered, and the manner in which the latter is typically denied or cautiously affirmed, signify the underlying ambivalence among elderly Singaporeans of their identity in this high modernist state. They are, by now, well socialised citizens who readily accept the terms of public housing in Singapore and the legitimacy and hegemony of the PAP government; at the same time, their experiences of rapid social and economic transformation since the 1960s and their advancing age have left them feeling increasingly sidelined in, and critical of, a society where unrelenting change is the basic frame of experience.

Conclusion

The 1961 Kampong Bukit Ho Swee fire is an important case study for understanding both postwar Singapore history and broader issues relating to urban calamities and the establishment of high modernity in the twentieth century. For the former, the social history of the inferno has brought us beyond the classic struggles between elites, which have preoccupied traditional political historiography to the major shifts in state-society relations which underpinned the making of modern Singapore after World War Two. This study of a calamitous event, the devastating fire; of the community which it so powerfully affected; and of a state which embarked on the rapid, large-scale development of modernist public housing within a state of emergency occasioned by the disaster, revealed the true origins, development and consequences of high modernity in postwar Singapore.

In brief, this study has examined how a semi-autonomous community of urban kampong dwellers became Singapore citizens in the 1960s. Politicians from the Progressive Party, the Labour Front, the People's Action Party, and the Barisan Sosialis clashed over political platforms in the 1950s and 1960s but were nevertheless united, together with the British colonial regime, in an ambitious campaign to forge Singapore into a viable, well-organised and progressive city-state. Beyond the political and ideological rhetoric, decolonisation for the island-state was really about breaking down the traditional semi-autonomous communal ways of life which had re-emerged after the war. It was about socialising the population of what was then depicted as 'Old Singapore', particularly low-income, Chinese nuclear or semi-extended families, into becoming model citizens of the new nation-state. The basic instrument of change in this ambitious undertaking was public housing, and its targets were the kampong settlements of unauthorised wooden dwellings which had proliferated at the margins of the City, and which were perceived as insanitary, liminal, albeit dangerous, 'black areas'. The Bukit Ho Swee fire on 25 May, then, was a historical turning point which decisively tipped the balance of this social-cultural struggle in favour of the PAP state. Although there had been other serious kampong fires in the preceding decade, the 1961 calamity was unprecedented in the scale of the officially planned rehousing operation for the fire victims, and the

resultant massive societal transformation which took place in the latter part of the 1960s.

The theme of change and continuity, consequently, lies at the very heart of this study. Some elements which would enable the PAP government to accomplish the making of modern Singapore after the Bukit Ho Swee fire were colonial legacies, including the powerful emergency discourse of kampong clearance and rehousing; the broad outlines of a plan for this vast project and the architecture of modernist emergency public housing well-suited for such schemes. There was also the important practical experience bequeathed by the British and Labour Front governments of the difficulties, but also the potential, of building emergency housing in the aftermath of kampong blazes, not only on behalf of the fire victims but also for the much larger numbers of wooden house dwellers living in the vicinity, who could then be cleared and relocated. Set against this background and context, the timing of the 1961 inferno was crucial. It occurred at the time of the birth of a self-governing nation-state, ruled over by a popularly-elected party which was much more determined than previous regimes to transform Singapore. As a result, the PAP's relief and rehousing work on behalf of the fire victims received a powerful moral and social impetus and mandate. Admittedly, the new government prior to the 1961 fire already possessed some of the qualities necessary to achieve its housing goals, most importantly, the formulation of a clear building plan and the recruitment of single-minded managers and architects into the Housing and Development Board to implement it. Nevertheless, the serious difficulties the PAP had faced in attempting to clear wooden house dwellers in 1960 stood in marked contrast to its largely unimpeded progress in clearing the Bukit Ho Swee fire site and rehousing the victims in emergency flats within the short space of a year. In turn, the newly built Bukit Ho Swee Estate served as a crucial precedent and staging platform for the HDB to rehouse kampong dwellers living in the vicinity, particularly Bukit Ban Kee and Bukit Merah, and to redevelop the southern precincts in the Central Area according to the Board's urban renewal programme. Teh Cheang Wan's view of the inferno as a 'God-sent opportunity' is testament to its singular historic importance.

In weighing up the role of the Bukit Ho Swee fire in the progressive clearance of urban kampongs in the remainder of the 1960s, it is true that the

number of kampong and shophouse dwellers rehoused in Bukit Ho Swee Estate – 45,000 in 1970 – was relatively small; that the operation affected mainly the areas adjoining Bukit Ho Swee (and consequently was outside the scope of kampong clearance in the eastern and northern parts of the City); and that political events in the early 1960s were also important for the HDB's success, particularly the suppression of the leftwing rural associations in 1963 which made the clearance of Toa Payoh possible. However, the real extent of the Bukit Ho Swee fire's impact was, most importantly, also symbolic and psychological as well as demographic. The government's response to the inferno gave the HDB an important early boost to its confidence and resolve in implementing what were then deeply contested policies of kampong clearance and emergency public housing development. Conversely, the calamity played a crucial role in winning over the hearts and minds of many kampong and shophouse residents to the utility of HDB housing, and a willingness to accept these programmes as genuinely serving their interests. In other words, the 1961 fire and the response in its aftermath became a strategic political victory which previous governments and the Singapore Improvement Trust had failed to achieve, and it was one which set the PAP on its way to achieving ideological hegemony over the citizenry of this newly emergent city-state.

The PAP's success in the Bukit Ho Swee project was not limited solely to the establishment of the first generation of emergency housing which was built over the fire site but also served as a powerful historical precedent for subsequent redevelopment schemes in the name of progress in Bukit Ho Swee Estate and in Singapore as a whole. There is a clear and direct link between the language of kampong clearance and resettlement in the late colonial era and the discourse of social revitalisation and redevelopment of HDB estates since the 1980s. Both discourses contained discursive language which empowered the state to demolish homes, and in many cases involuntarily relocate, and, mobilise or reintegrate families en masse into the social fabric of the enfolding modernist nation-state. Both policies, too, were based on emergency discourses in which the housing status quo was depicted as inimical to a safe, healthy and modern way of life and in which the consequences of rejecting change were deemed to be dire not only for the residents concerned but the nation as a whole. The key element in both sets of discourses and practices, of course, was a 'natural', 'non-political' historical emergency. In

Singapore's case, a devastating kampong fire created an opportune state of emergency and gave the government a sufficient moral authority and certitude to mobilise a community, and then a country. Two decades later, the officially constructed myth about the significance of the fire, likewise, justified the PAP's campaign to further restructure its own housing estates in the unceasing pursuit of progress. The 1961 inferno's social and political contribution to the advent of the government's public housing programme lies in its singular ability to signify and establish the validity of both official discourses and, consequently, to endorse the basis and rationale for future schemes of social change and societal transformation. The historical role of the fire as a catalyst, in short, is characteristic of the nature and relentless developmental dynamics of high modernity in our times.

If it had been key to the PAP government's campaign to reorganise Singapore, the Bukit Ho Swee fire's social and economic impact on the residents of the public housing estate which was subsequently built over the fire site was significantly more complex. There was both profound change and continuity in the residents' social and economic lives, out of which has emerged their ambivalent role and attitude as citizens of the high modernist state. Although strongly depicted as being resistant to progress by both the British and PAP regimes, low-income Chinese families in postwar Singapore inhabited a mental world in which modernity, quintessentially signified in the form of public housing, was often admired and sometimes desired, even if frequently beyond their financial means. This tension between the desire and ability to rent or own a modern flat had given rise in the 1950s to semi-autonomous, frequently illicit or disapproved ways of life taking hold at the urban periphery, most notably, in how readily families could rent, build or rebuild their own unauthorised wooden houses. The tension also led to a series of brief but emotionally charged contestations by the victims of the 1961 fire over the terms of the PAP's rehousing programme, particularly over the rents for the HDB emergency housing and at the 'coincident' nature of the fire. In the aftermath of the inferno, some of these semi-autonomous kampong ways of life and social markers have persisted in spirit if not completely in form, giving rise to a community which remains low-income and continues to persist, to some extent, at the social margins of contemporary Singapore society. What has changed, however, is the disappearance of the family's traditional ability to dictate the terms of their own

housing, and more generally, the course of their own future. Consequently, on the one hand, the ‘model citizen’ of Bukit Ho Swee Estate has embraced the PAP government’s philosophy and practice of constant progressive development and overhaul. On the other hand, they also felt a deep sense of personal loss in the face of a disorientating, disempowering social transformation, and who were, then, often resigned to their peripheral position in society. The persistence of the ‘counter-myth’ of government-inspired arson in the present day illustrates the heavy social price of citizenship and the dilemma of living with the culture and reality of the march of unrelenting progress in Singapore, and in developmental states more generally. The ambivalence which many low-income Chinese felt and continue to feel towards the impact of the high modernist philosophy in Singapore both before and after the 1961 fire upon their previous way of life up to the present is a recurring theme in this study.

It remains to reflect on the significance of the Bukit Ho Swee fire in comparative terms. Unlike the 1953 Shek Kip Mei fire in Hong Kong, the 1961 inferno was a far more significant event in Singapore’s history.¹ The Bukit Ho Swee rehousing programme did depend in part on the SIT’s emergency housing scheme at the site of the 1959 Kampong Tiong Bahru blaze. However, unlike Shek Kip Mei, the 1961 conflagration was more important than the fires which both preceded and followed it. In the Hong Kong case, the British colonial government’s response to the 1953 inferno was more uncertain. In Singapore, however, with a popularly-elected government determined to remake, in its own image, a fledgling state poised at the threshold of independence, the 1961 fire proved to be the decisive difference. The historical context of Singapore also explains why, unlike the 1911 Triangle fire in New York, the aftermath of the Bukit Ho Swee disaster witnessed an empowerment of the state rather than of society.² In this sense, the Singapore experience mirrors infernos in London in 1666, Edo in the 17th century, and Chicago in 1871, where a great disaster represented a valuable moral opportunity for the state to transform society. What this work has further attempted to do, through the use of

¹ Alan Smart’s argument that Hong Kong’s public housing programme developed as a continuing process in response to fires both before and after the Shek Kip Mei inferno is discussed in the Introduction.

² Referring to the discussion of the works of Dave von Drehle and John F. McClymer on the Triangle Fire in the Introduction.

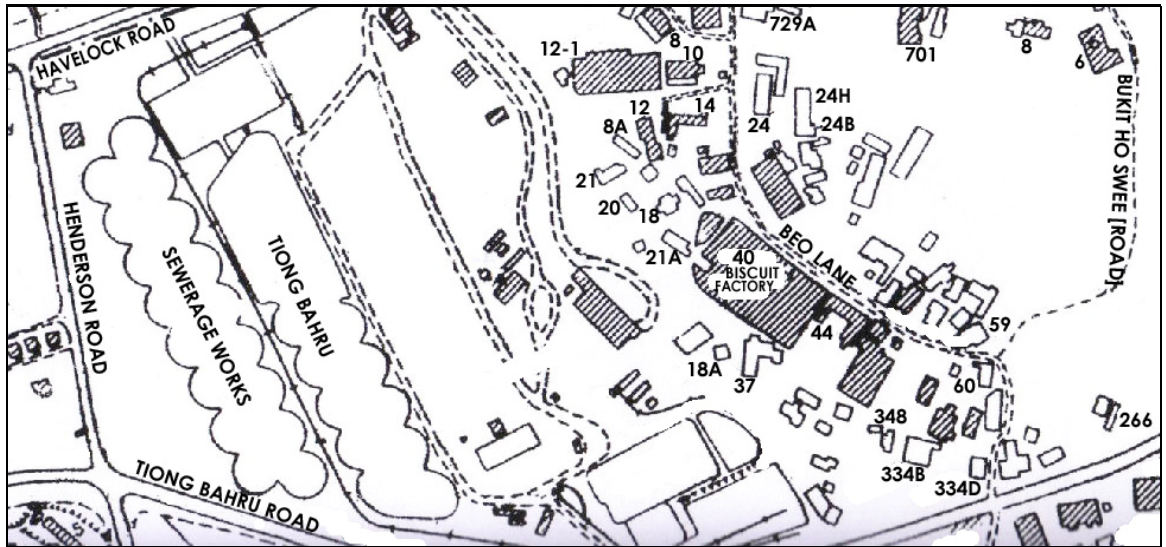
oral history and a careful reading of the official sources, is to explore the consequences of the official emergency rehabilitation programme for a socially and economically marginalised community which had formerly resided at the disaster site. Compared to the social destruction of an entire community by the Buffalo Creek flood in 1972, the Bukit Ho Swee rebuilding project had an obviously more complex social impact on the fire victims.³

Like great urban fires in other places and times, the Bukit Ho Swee fire has also been mythologised by the government, becoming in effect a powerful metaphor for Singapore's progress from 'Third World to First'. But, unlike the other fires, the official Bukit Ho Swee myth does not discriminate against minorities, as had happened after the Chicago fire, or demonise unpopular kings, as was the case of the infernos in seventeenth century London. Instead, the official myth of the Bukit Ho Swee fire emphasises unity and consensus as an affirmation of a nation's seemingly collective response, at the behest of a determined and decisive political leadership, to a monumental emergency. The imaginative power of the myth, though, belies the political leaders' ambitious plans, which were immediately implemented in the aftermath of the fire and which played a crucial, leading role in the making of a modern nation-state.

³ See Kai T. Eriksson's evaluation of the social impact of the Buffalo Creek flood, discussed in the Introduction.

Appendix: Localities and Residents of Kampong Bukit Ho Swee

Map 1: The Beo Lane-Bukit Ho Swee [Road] Locality, 1949



Key

Shaded: Permanent Buildings

Unshaded: Temporary Buildings

Buildings & Places

Former biscuit factory-warehouses, 40 Beo Lane

Soya sauce & peanut oil factories (including Kwong Joo Seng soya sauce factory)

Kai Kok Public School, 11-N Bukit Ho Swee

People

Chua Beng Huat, 60 Bukit Ho Swee

Lee Ah Gar & Lee Soo Seong

Peter Lim, 12-E Beo Lane

Lim Soo Hiang, 10 Beo Lane

Lim You Meng, 22 Beo Lane

Oh Geok Heok & Oh Boon Eng, 597-E Bukit Ho Swee

James Seah, 20 Beo Lane

Tay Ah Chuan

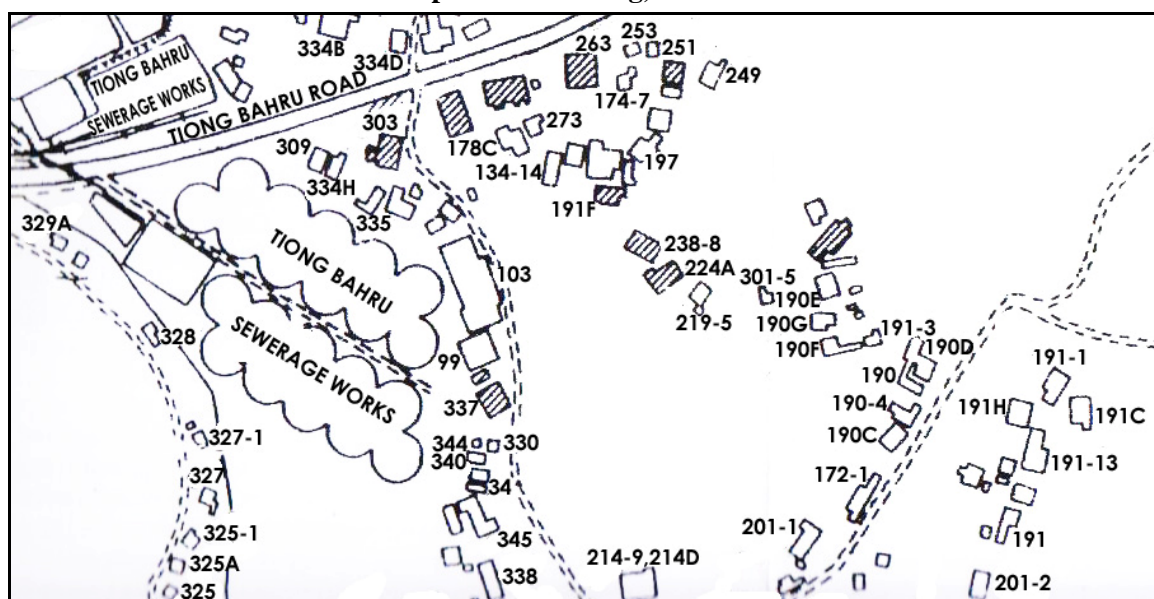
Wang Ah Tee, 37 Beo Lane

Adapted from *Map of Singapore Town*, 1949 (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 1: The Beo Lane-Bukit Ho Swee locality, 1958. Royal Air Force, RAF Ref. No. 81/8816, 1958 (Courtesy of Ministry of Defence).

Map 2: Si Kah Teng, 1949



Key

Shaded: Permanent Buildings

Unshaded: Temporary Buildings

Buildings & Places

Chinese Industrial & Commercial School (to the east)

Chuen Min Public School, 333 Tiong Bahru Road

King's Theatre

People

Angie Ng

Pang Ming Toh

Png Pong Tee

Samuel Seetoh, 172 Kampong Tiong Bahru

Soon Boon Quee

Tan Ah Kok

Tan Kok Kiem

Tay Bok Chiu

Adapted from *Map of Singapore Town, 1949* (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).

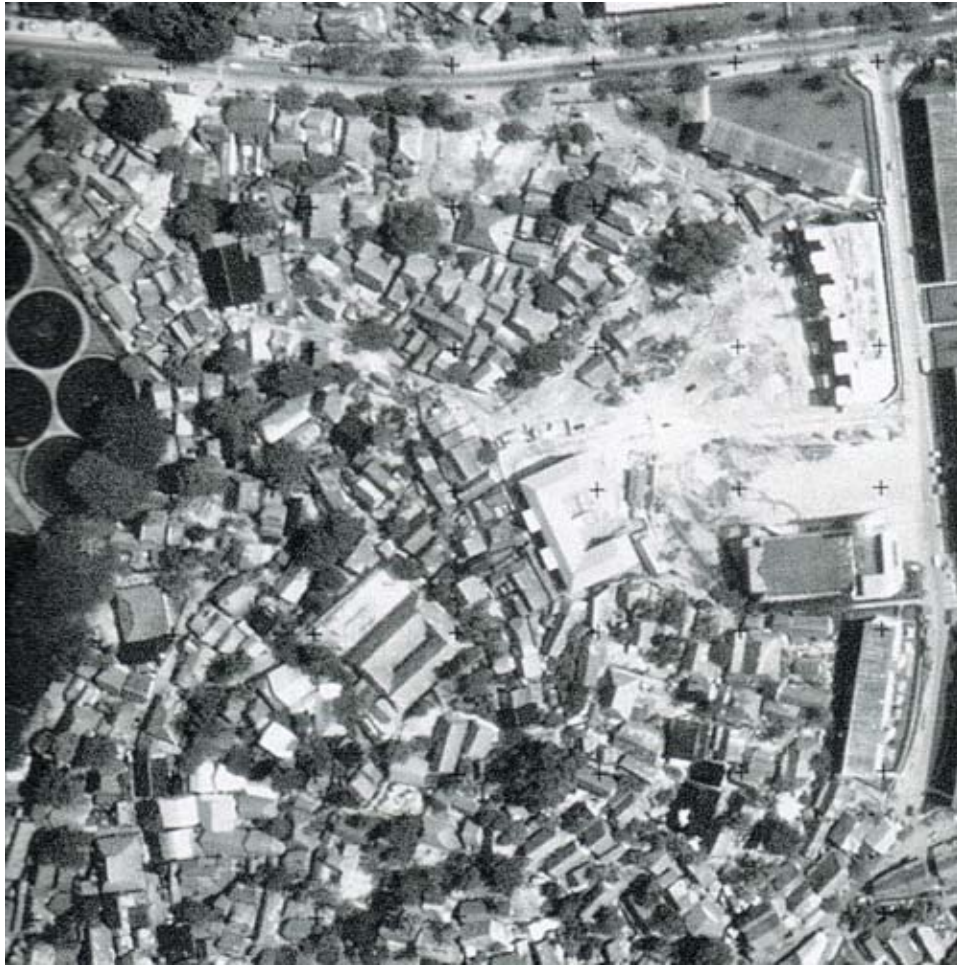
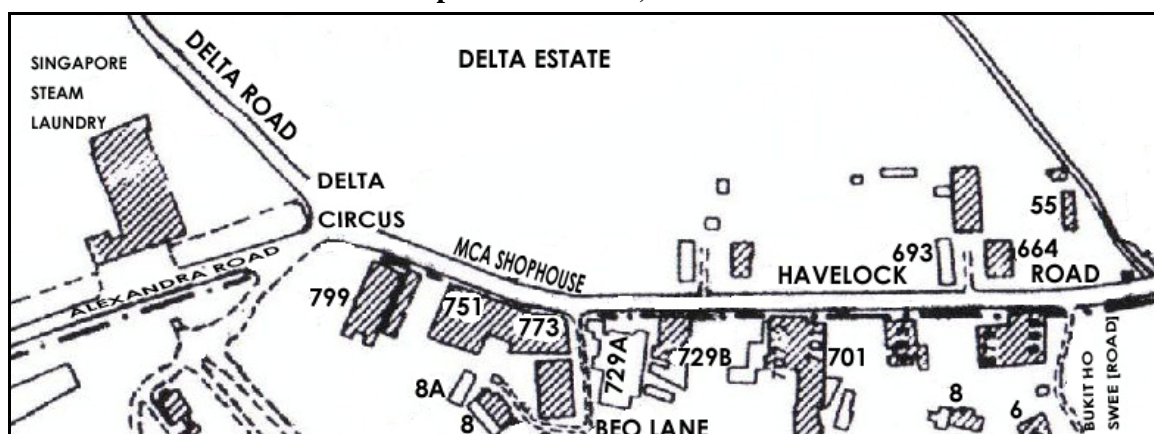


Plate 2: Si Kah Teng, 1958. Royal Air Force, RAF Ref. No. 81/8816, 1958 (Courtesy of Ministry of Defence).

Map 3: Or Kio Tau, 1949



Key

Shaded: Permanent Buildings

Unshaded: Temporary Buildings

Buildings & Places

MCA shophouse, 751, 773 Havelock Road

(also Or Kio Tau market)

Singapore Steam Laundry

Seiclene Electric Laundry

People

Goh Yong Soo

Ong Ah Sai

Ong Chye Ho

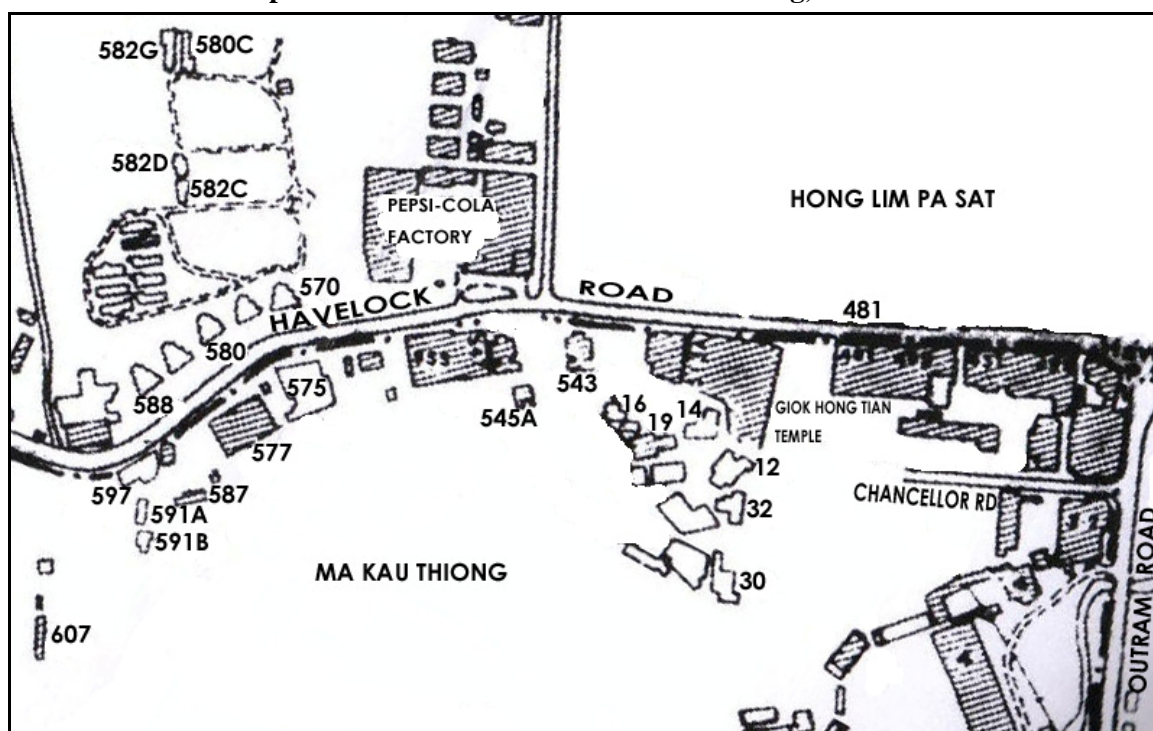
Tan Tiam Ho, Beh Swee Kim

Adapted from *Map of Singapore Town, 1949* (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 3: The Or Kio Tau locality up to Ganges Avenue, 1958. Royal Air Force, RAF Ref. No. 81/8816, 1958 (Courtesy of Ministry of Defence).

Map 4: Havelock Road below Ma Kau Thiong, 1949



Key

Shaded: Permanent Buildings

Unshaded: Temporary Buildings

Buildings & Places

Giok Hong Tian (Ti Kong Tua) temple

Fuk Tak Tong (Kusu Tua Pek Kong) temple

Pepsi-Cola Factory

Petrol kiosk

Sinsen soap factory

Tan Boon Liat Building (to the east)

Havelock Primary School

Ganges-Delta Community Centre

Havelock Road police station

People

Roy Chan, 585, 587 Havelock Road

Marc Cheok

Loh Tian Ho

Lum Siang Onn

James Seah, 608A Havelock Road

Elizabeth Soh

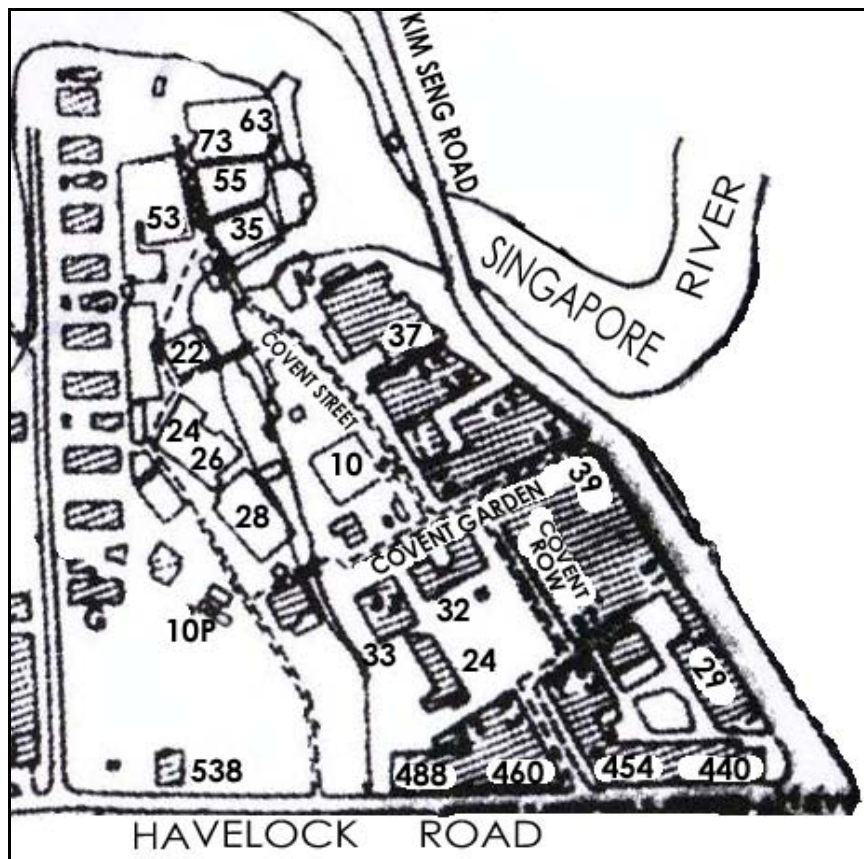
Zhou Lian Che

Adapted from *Map of Singapore Town, 1949* (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 4: Havelock Road below Ma Kau Thiong, 1958. Royal Air Force, RAF Ref. No. 81/8816, 1958 (Courtesy of Ministry of Defence).

Map 5: Hong Lim Pa Sat, 1949



Buildings & Places

Hong Lim market
Chung Cheng Middle School Branch (to the north)
Great World Amusement Park (to the north)

Key

Shaded: Permanent Buildings

Unshaded: Temporary Buildings

People

Joyce Soh, 52 Covent Garden
Teo Khoon Wah

Adapted from *Map of Singapore Town, 1949* (Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore).



Plate 5: Hong Lim Pa Sat, 1958. Royal Air Force, Sortie. No. V81:8930, 1958 (Courtesy of Ministry of Defence).

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